NISIOISIN
SUSPENSION
KUBITSURI HIGH SCHOOL
The Nonsense User's Disciple
Translated by
Daniel Joseph

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Illustrations
take

Suspension
Kubitsuri High School
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VERTICAL.

Kubitsuri Highschool

Act One·····Play It As It Lies

Act Two·····Shiogi's Iron Cordon

Act Three·····Hang 'Em High

Act Four·····The Dark Knife Rises

Act Five·····Backstab Rewind

Act Six·····End of the Line

Act Seven·····A Subjugation in Scarlet

After the Curtain·····The Lily Outgrows the Valley

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JUN AIKAWA——**A Contractor**

ICHIHIME YUKARIKI——**The Client**

ME (narrator)——**The Protagonist**

YUMA SHISEI——**“Zigzag”**

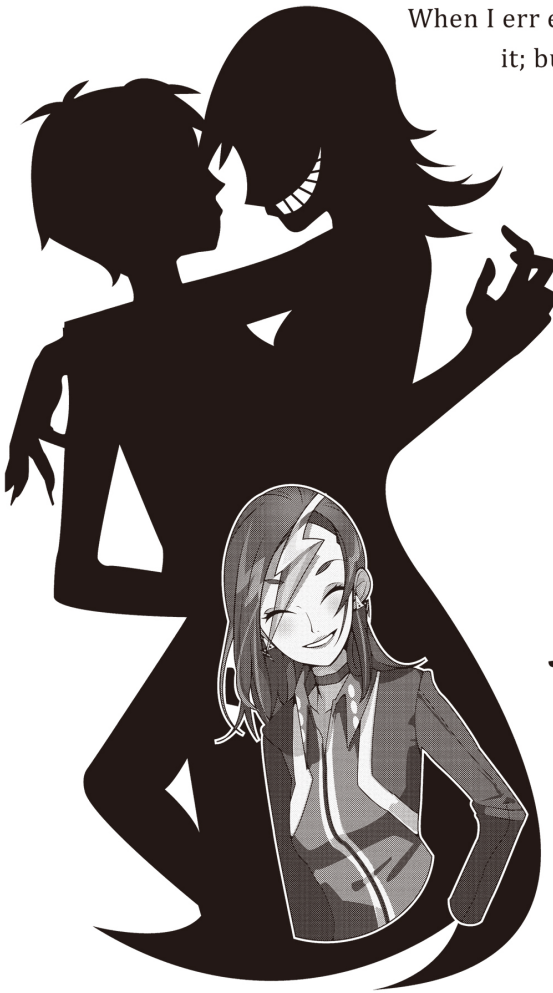
SHIOGI HAGIHARA——**“Tactics Expert”**

TAMAMO SAIJO——**“The Dark Knife”**

NOA ORIGAMI——**The Director**

When I err everyone can see
it; but not when I lie.

—Goethe



JUN AIKAWA
A Contractor

When all logically untenable possibilities have been eliminated, if whatever remains seems untenable, then it is.

I hadn't gone to class even though it was a normal school day, and I lay sprawled out on the tatami floor of my apartment engrossed in a book: Muju Ichien's Tsumakagami. It was an oldish book (which is to say it was clearly ancient) that my neighbor Miiko had leant me. So I treated it gingerly, even though I was only skimming. We generally read either to educate ourselves or just to kill time, and on this occasion it was the latter. So when a knock at the door interrupted me in the middle of turning the page, I wasn't particularly put out.

"Ahoyhoy. Sorry for the radio silence!"

My guest was, unexpectedly, Aikawa. What was unexpected wasn't that it was Aikawa, but that she'd taken the trouble to consider the common practice of knocking and to put it into practice. There was no point in interrogating her about why she'd knocked, so I simply replied, "Hey. It's been a while."

Jun Aikawa. Occupation: contractor. Gender: female. Height: tall□short torso, long legs. Style and Proportions: both first rate. The fact that every inch of her body was clothed in primary red may have represented a minor issue, but other than that there was no fault to be found with her bespoke suit. She possessed a beauty that one hundred out of one hundred people would acknowledge□if you got rid of the bizarrely malevolent look in her eyes, that is. As for her hairstyle, I was pretty sure she'd kept her bangs neatly trimmed at some point in the past, but apparently she'd let them grow out, and now their lustrous crimson fell to her shoulders.

"Sure has. Oh, looks like your fingers have healed up nicely."

"Yeah, thanks. So what's going on? Oh right, please, come on in."

"Nope, not today□"

At which point she flashed a cheerful grin my way. It was a vanishingly rare occurrence to see such an expression on her face—Jun Aikawa's smiles were always full of irony and malice—so for a second I was at a loss. She didn't seem at all concerned with such particulars, however, and still grinning, she reached out and put a hand on my shoulder; still grinning, she pulled me towards her; and, still grinning, she shoved the tip of the black, angular, extremely small but very serious-looking stun gun-like object she held in her other hand into my ribs.

A dull thud resounded from the region of my solar plexus.

"Nh. Guh…"

"Since we're leaving right away."

The Aikawa reflected in my eyes as they closed wasn't grinning anymore.

Act One

PLAY IT AS IT LIES

ME (narrator)
The Protagonist

0

In this world there are only absolutes.

1

…Wha.

Unpleasantly jostled awake by the sound of some kind of vibration, I found myself in a car. To be more precise, in the passenger seat of a bright red Cobra. Where I seemed to be sitting. In which case the vibration was the sound of the engine running, which meant that the car was currently moving, which meant that someone must be sitting in the driver's seat. Finding this roundabout thought process too irritating, I glanced at the driver's seat. Just as I thought, it was occupied by Aikawa, whistling away like she didn't have a care in the world (disturbingly, the tune was the elegiac opening of the first book of The Tale of the Heike). She was holding the steering wheel in one hand and fiddling with her bangs with the other. The top was down, and she seemed concerned about what the rush of wind was doing to her hairdo.

"Hm? Ah, Iitan, you awake? 'Morning."

"Oh…hey. Good morning," I responded, shaking my head a little. "Um…where are we?"

I was watching the passing scenery out of the corner of my eye as I

asked this, and as far as I could tell we seemed to be on a highway, though I couldn't immediately determine our current location. At the very least, it wasn't my apartment. Hm. No, the more pressing question was: why was I going for a drive with Aikawa? I didn't have a clue.

"My…memory seems to be a little hazy."

"I mean, that was some craaazy shit!" Aikawa suddenly raised her voice until she was basically shouting, and turned to face me. "Hm, I guess you must've forgotten, huh? No surprise there, after going through something. like. that. Must've been quite a shock. No one's gonna blame you for losing your memory. Not after something. like. that."

"S-Something like that, huh?"

It even came equipped with staccato as a standard feature.

What was the deal? I couldn't remember anything, but apparently I had once again gotten myself caught up in some kind of incident alongside Aikawa. I see, in that case it made perfect sense that I'd be sitting in the passenger seat of her beloved car, nothing strange about that at all.

"Yup. A terrible tragedy, not the kind of thing you can sum up in a few words." She looked at me with an incredibly serious expression on her face, then shook her head slightly. "Another moment, even one, and you might've died…"

"D-Died□now that you mention it, my abdomen really hurts for some reason…"

"Yeah, the after-effect of your enemy's attack. No, not just an enemy. A 'formidable foe' with fearsome abilities…but have no fear. After I knocked…um, while you were knocked out, I took care of everything."

Then Aikawa proceeded to give me a full and minutely detailed account of everything that had gone on over the last three days, filling me in on the incident, which shock had completely erased

from my memory. Though it took place over only three days, it was a tale of battle and war, a tale of tragedy and curious comedy, a tale of blood and gore, and above all a tale of love and sorrow. I had apparently stood on the brink of death time and time again, and Aikawa had pulled me back each time. To have escaped such a harrowing predicament not only with my life but with all my limbs intact was nothing short of a miracle. I never would've believed such a preposterous tale if Aikawa hadn't been the one telling it.

"That's quite a story… Forgetting such a catastrophic tragedy is pretty nuts, even for me. Please allow me to express my gratitude once again."

"Hey, cut the formalities. You're embarrassing me." Aikawa shrugged lightly. "At this point, you and I don't have the kind of tedious relationship where we have to thank each other for every little thing, do we?"

Giving me a forceful thumbs-up, she treated me to a quick wink accompanied by a lovely smile. Goddamn is she cool. No, not just cool, she's a great person. I've never known such a great person in all my life. Maybe I'd been wrong about her the whole time. I had thought she was sarcastic and conceited and only saw me as a plaything, but seemingly I needed to revise my opinion.

"I'm sorry, but you absolutely have to let me repay you for this. I'm one to three-fold repay you for all you've done, with more than just a high five. Protest all you want, but I'm going to pay you back whether you like it or not, and I won't take no for an answer. If ever you've got a problem, please, I'm at your service."

"I see. Well, if that's how you feel… Refusing such a generous offer would only sully the purity of your sentiment, and we can't have that, now, can we…" Aikawa wore an expression of inner turmoil. "That reminds me, as it happens, by complete coincidence I do have a piece of business that only you can help me with. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will. Please, leave it to me. This nonsense user is willing to die for you."

Glad to hear it, smiled Aikawa.

There was something wicked about that smile.

“The fact is that we’re on our way there right this moment. Let’s see. Sumiyuri Academy. You know it?”

“Not much more than the name.”

“How much more?”

“Umm…”

Sumiyuri Academy. A super-and-three-more-supers-precariously-balancing-on-top-of-that prestigious girls’ preparatory school in the Kyoto suburbs, exclusively for the social elite□the princess type, in other words. Derided by some as a “vocational school for the privileged class,” it’s a peerless educational institution where exam percentile and pedigree are prized above all else, and which normal people the likes of me have no hope of getting anywhere near.

“Hmph. That all you got?”

“Yup. It’s not just Sumiyuri, most schools maintain a policy of secrecy and insularity, so it’s no easy thing for information to leak out. Even the stuff I just told you I only know because I happened to hear it from Kunagisa.”

“Hanh? Why the hell does Kunagisa know all that? She’s definitely a princess in her own way, but she’s a shut-in. What does she care about any school?”

“The part she’s interested in is the uniforms. She’s obsessed with sailor outfits and what not. She was lamenting to me, ‘Woowee, Sumiyuri’s is the only uniform I can’t get my hands on.’”

“No shit? I didn’t know there was anything she couldn’t get her hands on. That makes me feel better.”

“But, I mean, she said, I’ll never give up! I swear by the black of my eyes!”

“Aren’t her eyes blue?”

“Guess that’s why she gave up. Anyway, what’s going on with Sumiyuri Academy?”

“Oh, right. What I want you to do□is infiltrate the school looking like that, and get a certain student out of there.”

When she said looking like that, I noticed for the first time that what I had on was not my usual get-up. Or rather, I noticed that I was wearing something downright weird. The top was a short-sleeved number, blacker than night, with matching buttons lined up on the left and right sides of the chest and an oddly oversized collar with a single stripe along it, the kind they call a sailor collar, accessorized as you might expect with a colored scarf. The bottoms were the same color as the top, a classy□pleated skirt. This was, without question, without supposition, and without a doubt not men’s clothing.

“That’s the Sumiyuri Academy uniform. I wasn’t really worried since you’re so slender, Iitan, but man does that suit you. Your hair’s nice and long, and even the fall of your bangs is perfect. And your lack of individuality is actually a plus in this situation.”

“Why□” I began as I composed myself after my momentary consternation, “Why am I done up in this funky, fancy outfit?”

Was gender the theme this time around? Identity politics can be pretty thorny, not the kind of thing for a greenhorn to get involved in.

“I put it on you while you were asleep. Oh, um, your clothes were covered in other people’s blood, so I had no choice. I definitely wasn’t thinking about getting you involved in anything else at that point.”

“I never thought you were. But, um, this look is pretty embarrassing for a nineteen-year-old guy…”

“What’re you talking about? Disguising yourself in women’s clothing is one of the fundamentals of sleuthing. It’s an indispensable element, you might say, the standard to end all mystery novel standards. The renowned Holmes himself wore

women's clothing on a regular basis."

"Who?"

"Mugen Mamiya dresses as a girl, what, a third of the time? In the action-adventure series, anyway."

"I prefer the weird tales series, so…"

"Even that spiritual detective wore a skirt when he was investigating a girls' school."

"We're borrowing a page from that?"

"Even Jojo wore women's clothing in Part 2 when he was infiltrating the Nazis."

"We're borrowing a page from that?!"

"Even MacArthur had to wear a skirt when he was a kid, they say."

"Please don't resort to referencing great historical figures…"

"And Yamato Takeru no Mikoto□"

"Now you're going to dust off mythology?"

"Zerozaki was also saying that he liked to wear women's clothing."

"Please don't tell me such plausible lies."

"I hear Hikari is into guys who wear women's clothing."

"Please don't tell me such implausible lies!"

The white alligator seemed to be closing in…

That is, Aikawa seemed to be a little too into boys' manga.

"What can you do. It's a girls' school. A guy can't get in there looking like a guy."

"I'm sure that's true, but…"

Or wait, was that “true”? I had a feeling that something crucial was fundamentally wrong at a more elemental level.

“Enough already. Quit your griping,” Aikawa finally turned threatening. “A minute ago you swore you’d do anything I said. Well? Were you lying to me?”

I vehemently did not recall promising to go so far as to give up the last shreds of my human dignity, but Aikawa was right, I couldn’t be such an ingrate. I understand, I nodded. It was certainly true that even she would have a tough time infiltrating a girls’ school. Schools tend to maintain outlandishly tight borders, never mind Sumiyuri Academy. There were serious difficulties inherent in putting Aikawa in that uniform and sending her in (though I couldn’t deny a certain personal curiosity), and I myself could never get inside a place like that in my regular clothes. It was a mystery why she had picked me for the task, but I’d cooperate to the best of my ability. Not like I had anything better to do.

“Okay, here’s your forged student ID. You’ll need it for the checkpoint at the main gate.”

“Thanks.” The ID had my picture affixed to it. Such meticulous preparation, almost as if this situation had been arranged from the start. “Um…you said something about getting some student out of there. In other words, your job this time is a search and rescue?”

Jun Aikawa’s job□she was a contractor. Not exactly an occupation based in high-minded morals. Basically, she would take on any task regardless of difficulty as long as the price was right, be it solving a locked-room murder, collecting information, trafficking illegal goods, taking down a serial killer, or a search and rescue. But who would someone want to locate badly enough to employ a front-liner like Aikawa, the world’s strongest contractor?

“It’s not quite a search and rescue, but yeah, something like that. Sumiyuri Academy is a one-hundred-percent residential boarding school, and security is tight. Getting even a single person out of there is a big job. There are ways to do it if violence is on the table, but this time around we’re shooting to keep things as quiet as possible.”

Keeping things quiet—is definitely not Aikawa's strong suit. She operates on the premise that "punching is faster than thinking," so in her hands even a logical locked-room murder case ends up turning into an action movie.

"Anyway, the job this time around is to spring Ichihime… That's the girl's name, Ichihime Yukariki."

"Spring her, huh… That makes it sound like the school is holding her captive."

"Close enough. Schools are basically facilities for incarcerating students, aren't they? Though the jailers call it education."

That was all Aikawa would tell me, nothing in the way of a more detailed briefing. Not that that was anything new; without bringing professional ethics or anything into it, she simply didn't care for things like explanations or exposition.

"It is what it is"—that sort of simplicity seemed to be at the root of Aikawa's being. It was an enlightened ground that I, irrationally bound by theoretical rules and logical tools as I am, could never reach.

"Well, I won't ask about the particulars. I'm not all that interested, to be honest. You just want me to locate this student—what was it, Yukariki?—keep her safe, and get her out of there, right?"

"That's my perceptive Iitan. But you don't need to worry about the 'locate' part. Since she'll be waiting for you. Here, take this."

On top of my forged student ID she placed a map, presumably of the Sumiyuri Academy campus. There was a single red mark on the small scrap of paper. Seemingly this was the place where the girl would be waiting. Next to it was written "Year 2, Class A."

"As for how to get her out, I'll leave that up to you. Ichihime herself can give you the details… I'm pretty sure that kid will be able to give you a proper explanation."

I sensed Aikawa's peculiar brand of intimacy in the phrase that kid. It seemed she had some connection to the girl. Were they, friends?

If so, perhaps this job was only half professional, and the other half was personal.

“And lastly, this…a visual of the target.” Aikawa placed a photograph on top of the map. “That picture was taken when Yukariki was twelve, though, so try and imagine what she’d look like five years down the line.”

“Five years at that age means she will’ve grown a lot. Won’t she look like a totally different person?”

I stared at the photo uneasily. It showed the innocent smile of a girl barely into her teens. No hint of irony or purity or mirth, just a genuine smile. Men of a certain persuasion wouldn’t be able to contain themselves. Trying to picture her that way five years along as a high school second-year, I guess I could say with confidence that she’d be quite the beauty.

“Why’re you staring at it like that? She your type, Iitan? Keep yer hands off her.”

“No way. I’m not much for younger girls.” I turned the picture upside down and dropped it on top of the map. “If she was older than me, it wouldn’t be out of the question.”

“Your sexual proclivities are so simple they’re complicated… Anyway, I’ll leave it to you. We’ve still got some time, so get some shuteye if you want.”

“Right… Oh, can I ask one more thing?”

“What?”

“Can I keep this uniform when the job is done? I’m sure Kunagisa would love to have it.”

Aikawa chuckled cynically and said, “Suit yourself,” then began to concentrate on driving. Which meant that up until then she hadn’t been concentrating on driving, despite the fact that we were on a highway, which was vaguely terrifying. Trying to massage away the lingering pain in my abdomen, I flipped the photograph back over and took another look at Ichihime Yukariki’s face.

Hmm. I couldn't put my finger on it, but…

Something about it roused my interest, just a little.

Yeah, this girl's aura was□

"Something I might enjoy, no nonsense…" I muttered too low for Aikawa to hear, before tucking the photo away in my breast pocket.

2

What does it mean to talk about a happy life? If it's a question of absolutes, then there's certainly a clear distinction between fortune and misfortune. And yet, however fortunate a person's circumstances may be, if that person considers himself unfortunate, he'll be unhappy. Conversely, however unfortunate a person's circumstances may be, if she self-identifies as fortunate, she'll be happy.

As long as you're judging things according to a standard of happy or unhappy, you have to surrender yourself completely to subjectivity. For instance, is someone who hits the jackpot in the lottery happy? From the perspective of an ordinary person, that would appear to be happiness. Yet for the person in question to consider himself lucky, he would've had to have the unlucky experience of "not hitting the jackpot" in the past. If this person was continually hitting the jackpot, that wouldn't be happiness, that'd be just another humdrum day. And of course the opposite holds true. How many people genuinely lament the bad luck of not winning the lottery?

Ultimately, people can only understand fortune and misfortune in relative terms. This means that things like "equality" can never actually exist in reality, that a truly impartial ontology is impossible. Fortune and misfortune are connected, and if you look not at the individual but at the whole, ultimately the two cancel each other out, it's a zero-sum game□

Was the kind of shaggy-dog story I was idly contemplating as I walked the halls of Sumiyuri Academy. I would be lying if I said I wasn't tense, but my infiltration had gone startlingly smoothly thus far. Aikawa's counterfeiting skills were apparently flawless, though I would expect no less of the world's strongest contractor. And my disguise also seemed to be flawless, even if I didn't like it. Since my arrival I'd passed any number of people whom I assumed to be

students of the academy, given that they were wearing the same black sailor outfit as me, but not a one had displayed any indication of doubt or suspicion at my presence.

Part of me was worried by the fact that it was all so easy, but as an intruder that was not something to complain about; it was all part of being the proverbial smooth criminal. Instead, I moved through the building at a pace that would arouse no suspicion, thinking to myself how lucky I was. Naturally I couldn't parade around campus with the campus map in my hand, so I relied on memory to find the appointed meeting place: Year 2, Class A. Anyone would agree that a student who was constantly looking at a map to navigate her own school was funny in the head.

"As far as I can tell, this seems like a pretty normal school, though…"

Given that it was a prestigious preparatory school for the princess set, I'd been expecting something a little more eccentric, something strange and different. Though when you really think about it, why would the facilities themselves hold any surprises? It was my own expectation that was off base there. Still, I can't deny that it was kind of anticlimactic.

"Since Aikawa was the one who asked me to do this, I figured it was going to be a lot tougher… But if this is all there is to it, seems like I'll be able to take care of everything in a snap. Fools rush in."

I had the feeling I wasn't using the expression "fools rush in" correctly, but whatever. I climbed the stairs, and, after getting a little lost, I found the Year 2, Class A homeroom. There was no one around. Mm-hm, very convenient. It's not like I was being compelled to the utmost secrecy, but better to be inconspicuous if possible.

However I still harbored some doubts. The fact that I'd succeeded at brazenly walking in through the front door was, upon consideration, odd. Didn't getting in easily mean you'd be able to get out just as easily? I'd been convinced the students were strictly and securely confined within the school grounds, but that didn't seem to be the case. So shouldn't've this Ichihime Yukariki been

able to leave whenever she wanted, without me, let alone Aikawa, having to get involved? And the fact that she could make this plan to meet me in the classroom seemed to indicate that her movements weren't actually curtailed all that stringently.

If at this point I'd thought things through a little more, I might've been able to sense something off about the "strange" atmosphere that hung about the school—the air itself somehow seemed to deviate from that of normal places.

Yet I didn't think about it particularly thoroughly, and just put my hand on the door to Year 2, Class A and went inside. The classroom itself was also a totally average high school classroom. Then again, I never attended a proper high school, so I really had no basis for saying so.

But that didn't matter. What did matter was that there was not a soul inside the room.

"Huh?"

This was a problem. Given how much I'd psyched myself up for my meeting with Miss Yukariki, this was way beyond a letdown. Maybe she was hiding somewhere in the room? It wasn't impossible. If she was hiding, where—

Just then, I thought I saw the cleaning supplies locker shake slightly. It didn't make sense that a locker would shake all on its own when the window was shut and the room was essentially devoid of breeze. A-ha, did that mean she was inside? Makes sense, that's very much the kind of hiding place a teenager would think of. The idea was probably to indulge in a bit of gloating as she watched her newly arrived escort stand around flummoxed, but I wasn't about to let her make a fool of me. I mean, up until three days ago I might've fallen for that trick. But these past three days I had cheated death countless times, in other words I had grown as a person, and against the new me this was less than child's play.

"What's thiiis? She's not here, what will I dooo," I murmured as I quietly approached the locker. Yup, if I gave it a good kick, I could startle her out of there like a frightened rabbit, no question. Such

childish pranks needed to be punished. I was standing in front of the locker contemplating whether to use my left foot or my right foot when,

Brrrrr

I felt chilly all over. At the same time, something was thrust into my back. Something thickish, and hard almost like the barrel of a gun

“Freeze, and stick ’em up.”

I put my hands up as I was told. I didn’t turn around. But even without turning around, I was able to glean a few pieces of information. The voice was that of a young or at least an immature female. And judging by the height from which it emanated, she was much shorter than me.

A-ha, so the locker was a decoy… I was forced to admit that I’d fallen into a simple trap. It was a bizarre strategic blunder for someone who’d escaped the jaws of death as often as I had. So bizarre that if you told me Aikawa had in fact fabricated that whole story, that it was a bald-faced lie, I’m afraid I might’ve been convinced.

“Who are you?” came the question from behind.

To which I casually responded, “Jun Aikawa sent me,” as if it was all no big deal. “But I’ve got no name to give you. You see, I pride myself on the fact that I’ve only ever told my real name to one person.”

“…?”

The sensation in my back relaxed momentarily at my idiosyncratic reply. It was an opening not even worthy of the name, but I seized it anyway, dodged left, and spun around. I was prepared to go out in a blaze of glory, taking my opponent with me, but maybe

because I was flustered, my legs got hopelessly tangled before I could finish turning, and I fell flat on my face. My “enemy” wasn’t about to let that pass and instantly closed the distance, firmly thrusting□

An alto recorder against my forehead.

“That’s a hell of a way to introduce yourself,” I said.

“I’m sorry. When we see someone we don’t know, we’re taught to conceal our presence and sneak up from behind.”

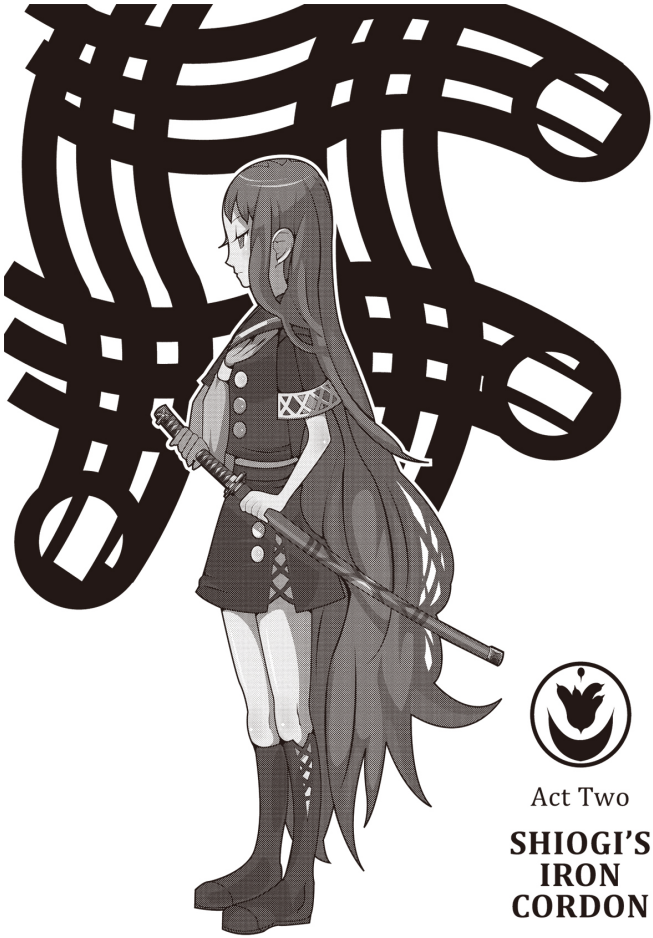
So saying, the girl whipped the recorder up and snapped it back down at an angle, like she was conducting an orchestra.

“Ah, gotcha…” I brushed away the tip of the recorder, and stood up. “Then, I’ll teach you how to introduce yourself like a grown-up.”

Now that we were facing each other, I took stock of this girl in her black uniform, a small pouch slung from her shoulder.

There was no mistaking her: it was the girl from the photo. Yup, no mistake. Her appearance was almost identical even though the photo had been taken five years ago. It would be no exaggeration to say that she hadn’t grown at all. Not just a small build; a tiny body. Not just an innocent face; a childish one. And□and that genuine smile.

“Nice to meet you, Ichihime Yukariki.”



Act Two

SHIOGI'S IRON CORDON

SHIOGI HAGIHARA
"Tactics Expert"

0

Pooh-pooh to peekaboo.

1

Ichihime Yukariki□Hime-chan□had apparently been hiding under the teacher's desk.

"That's not much of a hiding place… If someone opened the door and went left, you'd be in full view."

"Precisely. That's precisely why no one would thinks to look there. Even you went for the 'obvious' choice of the locker first, Master. Now do you see?"

"…"

"What's wrong, Master?"

"Nothing."

After our opening skirmish was over, we introduced ourselves, at which point Hime-chan insisted in a loud voice, "Call Hime-chan 'Hime-chan'!" Well, a name is just a signifier anyway, so I acquiesced, but the problem was with what Hime-chan wanted to call me.

Master.

This wasn't even anachronistic. It was just that "If you're a friend of Ms. Jun's, then to Hime-chan you're something like a master!" What this meant was strikingly unclear to me. And since she said, "something like," it didn't feel remotely respectful. In fact, I felt like she was making fun of me.

"So, that's how I ended up coming to get you out of here… I was told you'd provide the details."

"Hmmm. That's a toughie…" Hime-chan folded her arms and acted very much like she was deep in thought. "We don't have much times, plus Hime-chan's no good at explanations. First thing firsts, shouldn't we get out of here?"

"…Uh huh." Her response left something to be desired (or maybe it would be more accurate to say her brain left something to be desired), so I wasn't exactly satisfied, but maybe Hime-chan was right. We couldn't leave Aikawa waiting around outside forever. "You'll need your student ID to get out through the front gate, do you have it with you?"

"I does."

In which case she could've just escaped on her own. I turned this doubt over in my mind once more. But I got the sense there'd be no point in asking Hime-chan about it. As far as I could determine from the five minutes of conversation we'd had thus far, I couldn't expect a straight answer out of her. My first impression of Hime-chan was basically of "a girl who speaks bad Japanese."

"Okay then… Shall we?"

"Comiiing!" Hime-chan circled around behind me like a puppy. Given previous events, this put me on my guard, but this time I didn't feel anything poking me in the back. "Let's vamoooose!"

Shaking my head at her misplaced cheerfulness and enthusiasm, I exited the Year 2, Class A homeroom. "Keep quiet so we don't draw attention to ourselves," I cautioned Hime-chan, then took off down the hall. All I had to do now was retrace my steps, easy breezy. I couldn't imagine what if any obstacles could be lying in wait for us,

and it seemed like my duties would be discharged all too soon. I was thrilled it'd been so easy, but I started to feel bad for Aikawa. Like, was this really sufficient to constitute payback for everything I owed her?

"By the way, Hime-chan, how do you know Aikawa?"

"Ahhh!" She shrieked without any regard for our situation and pointed her finger at me. "Don't do that, Master! If you calls Ms. Jun by her last name she'll be angry!"

"So what… No, I mean, it's fine. She's not even here. Anyway, what's your relationship with Jun?"

"Let's seeee. She came to my rescues, back when that photograph you have was taken. That was five years ago now. Boy, that really takes me back." Once again disregarding the circumstances, Hime-chan closed her eyes and gave herself over to nostalgic reminiscence. "So I guess she's like my benefactor. Teeheehee, Hime-chan is even ready to die at Ms. Jun's command. Though of course that's proof of my faith that Ms. Jun would never do that, and it definitely doesn't mean I want to die. But what about you, Master, what's your relationship with Ms. Jun?"

"Friends, just friends. We're just good friends."

Repeating it three times only served to make it sound less convincing, and with a "Hmm?" Hime-chan cocked her head ever so slightly. But that tepidly truthful answer was all I had on hand. Me and Aikawa's relationship□I'd never given it any serious thought. We'd met more or less by chance, and she'd gotten me to help her with her work, messed around with me, bullied me a bit for good measure, and that was about it.

But never mind repaying her debt of gratitude to Aikawa, Hime-chan was compounding it, so I was confounded. Dammit, why couldn't she just take a page out of my book?

As we were about to descend the stairwell, two students came up it. A pair of girls. Uh oh, better be careful. Time to wrap up the conversation and casually walk on by without catching their eye□

“THERE SHE IS!” yelled one of the girls, instantly scattering all of my thinking to the four winds. Her finger pointed right through me at Hime-chan, where she stood behind my back. Before I could turn and say anything to her, Hime-chan grabbed my left arm and headed up the stairs instead. Dragging me along behind her—being dragged along by a tiny high school girl is a seriously uncool look, but I didn’t have time to worry about that at the moment. She was yanking me forward, and, still clueless as to what was going on, I began racing up the stairs after her, almost as if we were fleeing from those two students.

As if we were fleeing—which is to say, we were. The two girls were chasing after us, pounding along behind us at an astonishing speed. I didn’t know why Hime-chan had run from them, nor what their rationale for chasing us was, but at this rate they were bound to catch up to us sooner or later.

—There she is!

That made it sound like they’d been looking for Hime-chan. This job of Aikawa’s was a “search and rescue” but—was this somehow connected? No, no time to worry about that. Right now we were on the lam. The most important thing when you’re running away is to keep ahead of your pursuers, it’s as simple as that. And Hime-chan, who was leading the way, was not what you would call fleet of foot. By which I mean she was slow. Really fucking slow. Which makes sense, seeing as her stride was no more than half the length of the average person’s.

“Sorry ’bout this.” I sped up and pulled alongside Hime-chan, then put my arm around her waist and pulled her up into my arms.

“Kwaah!”

Hime-chan let out a strange shriek, but I didn’t pay it any mind. She was just as light—lighter—than she looked. This much of a burden wouldn’t even constitute a handicap—in fact, letting this burden run ahead of me would be a much greater one. I continued accelerating, and succeeded at shaking off the two girls who were after us. Or rather, they didn’t seem to have a particularly strong desire to chase us, and at some point during my blind sprint through the school, I

realized there was no longer anyone behind us.

“I think we cans stop now,” Hime-chan said, still suspended at my side, so I stopped running and set her down. I looked around but didn’t recognize where we were. Which was perhaps only natural, after all that racing around. Seemed like I was going to have to consult the map of this school I supposedly attended after all, there was no helping it.

“Phew.” I’d gone on that mad dash without any warm-up, and my heart was beating so hard it made my ribcage shake. I wasn’t tired, but I needed to rest. “Though sitting down in the hallway seems like a bad idea. Let’s try that classroom.”

“Okay,” Hime-chan nodded obediently. “Still, you’re a lot stronger than you look, Master.”

“Nah, not really. You’re just light, Hime-chan.” I sat down on the teacher’s desk. “So, what was…that? Hime-chan, are you by any chance on the lam?”

“I am, yes.” Another obedient little nod, for crying out loud. “Didn’t you knew that? Right now Hime-chan is on the school’s most wanted list. That’s why I need your helps?”

She had the tone of someone explaining some self-evident logic to a child, but I wasn’t listening. Well, now those girls’ reaction made sense. If they’d “found” someone who was on the wanted list, it was only natural.

Did the fact that she wasn’t being confined simply mean that she wasn’t being confined “yet”? Then Hime-chan hadn’t been hiding under the desk as a malicious prank to scare me. Had the students I passed on my way to Year 2, Class A also been searching for her? It sure hadn’t seemed like it, but…interesting. So that’s why she needed me to rescue her. At present, it was impossible for Hime-chan to escape the academy on her own.

“What the hell… You’ve gotta tell me that kind of thing up front. If you had, I might’ve been able to come up with some kind of plan… As it is, we just waltzed right up to them and gave ourselves away.”

“But you seemed so confident about getting Hime-chan out of here, Master, I assumed you must’ve had some kinds of secret plan up your sleeves.”

“…” Was this my fault? Well, in some overarching sense maybe it was. “Forget about that. Listen, Hime-chan, did you do something bad? The most wanted list, being on the lam□it sounds pretty serious.”

“Uhhh,” groaned Hime-chan. “It isn’t really. Though it might seems like it to them. I don’t know.”

“Are you maybe being bullied?”

No matter what novel angle you might try to observe her from, Hime-chan didn’t seem like the type to get bullied, but you can’t judge a book by its cover. At this kind of princess prep school, who knows, I thought, but that was just prejudice talking.

“Bullied… I only wish.”

I didn’t know what that meant. In fact, I even got the impression Hime-chan was being evasive. It was almost as if…she was trying to look out for me, like, you’re better off not knowing.

“There’s…something strange about this school. I already knew it was special…but it’s more than that. Hime-chan. Think you can give me a proper explanation?”

“Well, to put it simply, it’s a high school.”

Too simple.

“But, let me ask you, Master. How much…do you ‘already know’ abouts this school?”

“Aikawa asked me that too.”

I told her exactly what I’d told Aikawa. Hime-chan listened and nodded saying, “Is that all?” just like Aikawa had. Apart from the cloud that crossed her face, that is.

“Okay, Master, do you know anyone…or does anyone you know know anyone, or no, it doesn’t matter if you know them, but have you ever heard of a single person passing the entrance exam for this school?”

“Hm? Um…no—I guess I haven’t.”

“Pardon me for interrupting before you can says, ‘That’s just a coincidence’—but then, do you know of any alumnae—that is, do you know a single person who’s graduated from this academy?”

“That’s—uhhhh…uh?”

Weird. I couldn’t think of a single person. No—that couldn’t be true.

Sumiyuri Academy makes up a massive portion of the recommendation quota for famous colleges not only in Japan but around the world, it’s a super-elite preparatory school, so naturally there should be tons of Sumiyuri alumnae among the prominent people in various fields.

Should be—and yet, I couldn’t think of a single one? Was that—could that really be a coincidence?

“Now do you see?” asked Hime-chan. “No one matriculates and no one graduates—that kind of high school isn’t a normal high school, is it?”

“But Sumiyuri is—”

“Huh?” Hime-chan looked genuinely surprised, but she quickly recovered herself. “Oh right, Sumiyuri—that’s the name of this school, isn’t it. I’d forgetten. Now that you mention it, the ‘teachers’ do call it that—that’s not what Hime-chan and the other ‘students’ calls this place, though.”

“Then…what do you call it?”

“‘Hang ’Em High’…”

I was struck dumb by the extreme masochism of that moniker.

A school.

A locked-room, closed-shop organization that maintains a level of secrecy and insularity it would be no stretch to call fastidious. Impossible to guess from the outside what might be going on inside. And once you append the modifiers “preparatory” and “for the princess set,” it becomes that much more untouchable. In other words, it’s no easy thing to shine a light on its internal activities, no matter what they might be—was that the deal?

What—the hell had Aikawa asked me to do?

I had the creeping feeling that I’d gotten dragged into an outrageous, outlandish situation. Seemed like I’d stepped knee deep in shit again without even realizing it.

“Uhhh.” Groaning a little, Hime-chan whipped up the tip of her finger, then snapped it back to its original position. The motion seemed to be a habit of hers. “We’re screwed, isn’t we. Hime-chan should’ve known better. I assumed Ms. Jun must’ve told you at least that much—”

There seemed to have been a crossed wire in the information relay. But it was nothing to blame Hime-chan for. No one would expect the person who came to break them out—and it did clearly seem to be a breakout—to be a rank amateur like myself. To insist they should have would be ridiculous.

“But why didn’t Aikawa tell me any of this… Without knowing it, how could I complete my mission?”

Yeah, Jun Aikawa was the one to blame.

Ms. Negligence bore full responsibility.

“Hmm. But I don’t think Ms. Jun thought it would be such a big job. Hime-chan kind of blew it on the way to the rendezvous point, so they’re a lot hotter on my trail than Ms. Jun was expected. And now they’ve discovered that I gaved them the slip and hid. We can’t stay in this classroom forever, either.”

“Can you get in touch with Aikawa? You must’ve contacted her to

set up the meeting, at least."

"When I got in touched her before they weren't after me yet. So I just used the phone in the dorm."

"Oh…"

It wasn't that she wanted to escape the academy because they were after her; they were after her because she was trying to escape the academy—was that it? But that would mean this place was like a prison. Or maybe forget about the like part.

"I see what we're up against…" I didn't, I still didn't understand the situation at all. What I grasped was that this was no ordinary school—that it was an abnormal place, neither preparatory school nor princess factory. "Abnormal… It's certainly starting to seem that way."

But if that was the case—then we were in my wheelhouse. Things had definitely not panned out the way I'd expected, but whether or not this was a sinking ship, it was the ship we were on, for sure.

"I guess we have no choice," Hime-chan said. "Let's keep hiding in here for now while we come up with a plan. This calls for a careful considerations. There's nothing to worry about. If Hime-chan and Master can't get ourselves outs of here, I'm sure Ms. Jun will come and save us. She's soft on her friends, after all, she'd never abandon us."

"Did you say, keep hiding?" I asked with my back to her, having gotten down from the desk and walked over towards the window. "That's ass backwards—hiding would be a bad idea precisely because we've been found out. They already know we're in this building. We have to take immediate countermeasures."

I opened the window wide. Then, picking up a desk, I brought it over and threw it out. Having fled there blindly I didn't know what floor we were on, but it definitely seemed to be pretty high up, and it took a few seconds before I heard the sound of the desk smashing on the ground below. Unconcerned, I took the chair that had gone with the desk, as well as the desk behind it, and threw them both

out the window as well.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Hime-chan launched herself at me and clung to my waist. “That’s super ridiculously conspicuous! It’s like you’re begging them to come get us!”

“I just turned nineteen this past March—” I stopped after the sixth desk and broke Hime-chan’s meaninglessly light hold on me. “And all I’ve thought about for those nineteen years was how to outsmart people. How do I get away from other people? All I’ve thought about has been how to escape. I don’t know what the deal with this place is—but no ‘place’ is gonna keep me from getting away.”

There was still no one in the vicinity of the pile of smashed chairs and desks on the ground far below us. But it was unthinkable that no one had noticed that much noise—and of course the ones looking for Hime-chan must’ve heard it. In which case they would naturally have to search the classrooms on a direct trajectory from the pile of debris. Which would include this classroom, but a lot of other classrooms as well. Lead them on a merry chase along the path we’d taken here by intentionally leaving footprints everywhere we went—too much evidence, a vast array of clues; that was more or less my strategy.

“Now, it’s dangerous here, so let’s go.”

“Okay. But Hime-chan almost never comes to this parts of the school—so I don’t really know which ways to go.”

“That’s fine, my map—” I felt around in my pocket. “…is gone.” Not only that, the photo of Hime-chan was gone too. Only my fake student ID was still there in the breast pocket of my uniform. I must’ve dropped the rest somewhere during the chase. What the hell. After all that big talk, I stumbled at the starting line. “Well, we came up, so if we go down we should be able to get out of the building. And if we can get out of the building, I’m sure we can figure something out from there.”

“That’s a pretty half-baked plan.” Hime-chan sounded incredulous. “But you’re more optimistical than I expected, Master. I’m surprised.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I mumbled vaguely. I’m not an optimistic person, of course. An optimistic person wouldn’t spend nineteen years thinking up ways to fool people. If possible, I, too, would’ve liked to sit tight and silently wait for Aikawa to come and save us.

But I couldn’t help thinking about it. About Hime-chan’s gloomy face when she referred to Sumiyuri Academy as Hang ’Em High. I didn’t know where I’d gone wrong, but I’d somehow ended up wanting to make sure that look never crossed her face again. It wasn’t about repaying Aikawa or anything, I just felt like it was my personal obligation to do something for her, if I could.

I’d probably ended up conflating them. Ichihime Yukariki and Blue, back when she was known as a savant.

So this wasn’t even a desire to protect Hime-chan. It was just self-satisfaction no, it might as well have been autotoxemia.

What an unbearable level of nonsense.

At that point I didn’t yet grasp the enormity of the situation, I had no inkling of the scale of the storm I was putting myself at the center of, I was a babe in the woods who didn’t know his ass from his elbow, so there was definitely a certain recklessness to my folly. Still and all, I didn’t think I would regret it, which is a rare occurrence for a relentlessly retrospective nonsense user like me.

I really didn’t think so.

Despite the fact that I’ve never once in my life done something and not lived to regret it.

2

“The fact is, Hime-chan doesn’t really know neither.”

Retracing our steps would’ve been the quickest way to get back downstairs, but it would’ve been imprudent, to say the least. Which is why the first step was to find a different stairwell from the one we’d taken to get there this proved difficult, however. Come on, such an impressively large structure couldn’t possibly have only one stairwell.

I hadn’t realized this before because when I was alone, I’d been following the route laid out on the map, but this building was like a maze a three-dimensional labyrinth. Was it why the place felt so strange? The construction itself wasn’t actually that complicated, but the building was oddly distorted. It was warped. To the point that walking around in it was starting to make me feel uneasy. In such a squeaky-clean, brand-new building what could this composition possibly mean?

“See, from the inside, it’s almost impossible to determine what kind of place this is, right? Good or bad, superior or inferior, fortunate or unfortunate, they’re all things you judge in comparison to something else, which is why Hime-chan has a hard time saying much of anything about this school. Why I can’t explain its properly.”

“I don’t think you need to make it so complicated.” At long last we discovered a stairwell, and I kept an eye on our surroundings as I said this to Hime-chan. “What that might be is irrelevant in reality. The only question is whether it suits you or not, whether it’s a good fit. If you want to get out of this school, then that’s all that matters. It’s anyone who tries to stop you that’s messed up.”

Because the one thing everyone should be allowed is the freedom to run away though I didn’t actually say that out loud.

“But listen, Hime-chan—I get the impression this school doesn’t teach the normal subjects, but in that case, what’ve you been learning this past year?”

“I told you. Stuff like, ‘When you see someone you don’t know, conceal your presence and sneak up from behind.’”

That wasn’t just a joke to break the ice?

Hmm. I had somehow failed to really consider it, but she’d pretty much held my life in her hands at that moment. Not that you can kill someone with a recorder.

In other words—this Sumiyuri Academy had a fairly specialized curriculum—and was like a training facility—or a boot camp? Never mind the questionable legality of the situation.

The ER3 System’s Fully Integrated Unified Studies Research Center, which I had once had the honor of attending, was similar in a certain sense. That organization very much rode the line between legal and illegal, and in their MS-2 Division, both mind and body were strengthened to the limit of their respective capacities—that division in fact specialized in the production of “The Orange Seed.” But every division was involved in testing the limits of this thing we call a “person” in one way or another, if not to the same extreme. Even an exchange student like myself underwent the same special training. Washout though I was.

If this was that kind of place, however—then what the hell was behind this academy? To maintain this kind of facility, this level of secrecy, it’d have to be something on the order of the Kunagisa Organ. In which case opposing them at all was a big mistake. Yeah, the only possible course of action was to turn tail and run.

Dammit, Aikawa had really flimflammed me. What a snake oil salesman. Not that I’d had any illusions about sneaking into an all-girls’ school and having a dazzling, all-smiles escapade with a high-society naïf, but the revelation that this school was like that wartime military something or other, that was a bridge too far. Though, I hear snake oil is actually good for you.

“Strange…” After descending one flight of stairs, I realized something. “I made that huge ruckus, but nobody seems to be bothered about it at all□I don’t sense anyone’s presence in the building.”

“Can you usually?”

“Uh huh. Because I’m a coward, I’m very sensitive to people’s gazes and presences and so forth…but there’s been nothing for a while now. I’m not looking to be found, but I was expecting to have to use a little bit of force to break out of here. And those two girls definitely recognized you…”

I may not have had a precise handle on our position, but we could’ve done with a little more of a reaction from the other side, no?

“If no one’s after us, then isn’t it okay to relax? It’s like manga from heaven.”

“…? Oh, manna from heaven, yeah… I mean, that’s all well and good, but just traipsing down the stairs seems too risky… Let’s make a lateral move.”

“On a hunch? How geometric of you.”

“I’m not sure it involves any metric whatsoever, but oh well.” I looked at Hime-chan. “You weren’t by any chance raised in America or something, were you?”

“Wow! How did you know?!”

“Just a hunch.”

Be that as it may.

In this situation there was a good chance of an ambush. Upon consideration, if they knew that Hime-chan’s goal was to escape from the academy, then there was no need for them to go to the trouble of chasing her. That would also plausibly explain why those two had given up their pursuit.

Which made it all the more imperative that I outsmart them, huh?

“Uh oh.”

I was starting to enjoy this a little too much. Even though it’d turned into such a hassle. I, who hate hassle more than anything, who do everything in his power to avoid making waves.

Must be Hime-chan’s fault, I thought as we turned down the hallway. Trying to blame it on someone else was typical of me, and pretty unfair, but when I looked at Hime-chan, so boundlessly cheerful in spite of the fact that we had our backs against the wall, getting all gloomy and worried and depressed about it started to seem foolish. I didn’t even need to bust out the nonsense.

They really are similar, I thought.

Both looked so young for their age, both were so innocent and unaffected. There were too many similar parts to count. Could it just be a coincidence? I’d always assumed there couldn’t possibly be anyone else like her, but…

It was unsettling, as if the answer to X times Y had somehow come out different from the answer to Y times X.

“What’s the matters, Master? Why are you staring at Hime-chan like that… Oh! C-Could it be!”

“It couldn’t,” I shut her down instantly. I had no intention of letting my reputation drop any lower than it already had. “What floor are we on, though? As far as I can tell from the view out the window, it’s got to be the third or fourth floor, at least. This is a real high-rise by Kyoto standards…but maybe that’s irrelevant, this far out in the suburbs.”

“Well, they do say a place for everything and friends in high places, you know?”

“Almost slipped that one by me, but you’re mixing metaphors.”

Hmmm? Hime-chan cocked her head in confusion…and that’s when it happened.

All of a sudden the door to one of the nearby classrooms flew open and four people wearing the same black uniforms as we were rushed out, all of them tackling Hime-chan. No other way of describing how violently they took her down. Before she had a chance to resist, they'd knocked her to the floor of the hallway and pinned her arms and legs in place.

"…!"

An ambush I'd been concerned about the possibility, of course, but why here? Why not at the entrance to the school? It was pointless to set an ambush in a nowhere spot like this. Which is exactly why I had decided this route was safe, and decided not to go down the stairs

"Exactly why, huh."

Shit. They'd outsmarted me, which was exactly why I had to eat those stupid words now.

And the crucial thing here was that all four of our ambushers had gone for Hime-chan. It's not like I'm all that strong, and you definitely couldn't call me buff, but surely I looked more solidly built than she did. She was like a little kid. The fact that all of them had left me alone and gone for Hime-chan meant

That there were more ambushers hiding in the classroom.

And that they were stronger than these four.

"M-Maste"

They covered her mouth before she could finish. The four didn't even look at me. Which also spoke to their faith in whoever was waiting inside that classroom. They didn't even need to worry about me.

What a joke…

For me of all people to lose a battle of wits.

"Shiogi Hagihara"

Announcing herself, a girl emerged from the classroom and fixed me with a gaze icy enough to freeze the blood. A thorough, meticulous look, as if she was appraising me. She wore a black uniform like the other four, which meant she was a “pupil” at this academy. Her long black hair fell all the way to her ankles, and was unusually beautiful; I have to admit that, in spite of the situation, I was somewhat captivated. By which I mean that her that Shiogi’s entire body radiated the same bewitching aura as the edge of a katana.

If Hime-chan was like Blue, this girl was more like that red

“I’m acting as tactics expert at the moment.”

“Hmm… ‘Tactics expert,’ sure.” Nodding, I took a step back. Her presence was overwhelming. “I guess that means your ‘tactic’ worked like a charm, huh?”

“Oh. You’re a boy?” said Shiogi, apparently first realizing this upon hearing my voice. “It’s been a long time since I encountered a boy my age. The rest of you, take a good look.”

This was the inexplicable instruction she gave to the four who were pinning Hime-chan to the floor no. She’d called herself a “tactics expert.” There was no way she was giving “inexplicable” instructions. There must’ve been something behind it.

“Okay then, lessee. Keiki, Roka, Ami, Shuki take her to the same place as before. Keep her hands and feet bound, and don’t let up, even for a moment. I shall deal with this gentleman.”

Nodding at Shiogi’s words, the quartet dragged Hime-chan to her feet and headed off towards the stairwell. There was nothing I could do to stop them. Not with a serious obstacle standing in my way.

Belatedly realizing that the two girls we’d encountered on the stairs had been among the four, I faced Shiogi and asked, “Were those their real names? They sounded blatantly made up.”

“Phew that’s a relief.” Not answering my question, in fact not even facing me, Shiogi sighed like someone who’d just completed an

onerous task. “Guess we managed to wrap things up before ‘Zigzag’ was deployed—I’m just glad we pulled it off without anybody getting hurt.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Hm? Oh, you mean you? Right, right…” With a smile not at all in keeping with her age, Shiogi courteously turned to face me again. “Now then, I’ll accompany you to the front gate, so if you don’t mind, it’s time to go.”

“…”

“What I’m trying to say is, We’ll overlook this little incident, so get out of here, now—but maybe you’re not getting the picture? Mr. Transvestite.”

“Well, it’s a hard picture to get, so I’m struggling,” I replied, forcing myself to lower my voice. “I’m afraid I’m not so amiable—and I really hate losing a match I was expecting to win.”

“Kind of inflexible, aren’t you. Seems like we’ll get along famously.”

Shiogi was already moving as she said this. With flowing footwork—definitely some form of the martial arts—she grabbed my arm and spun around behind me, locking my shoulder joint in place. Though I was still standing, I’d been rendered immobile in the blink of an eye. And by this slender girl no less. The fact that I’d let my guard down was no excuse. Since she’d put me at ease for the express purpose of attacking me.

“I’m a tactician, so actual combat isn’t my forte—but I take an interest in the basics of the art of self-defense.”

“They even teach that kind of thing at this academy?”

“The answer to that is ‘it’s the only kind of thing they teach here’… but, none of that.” Shiogi wrenched harder, and the sharp pain shooting through my shoulder intensified. “We can’t have you taking such a cocky attitude, not when your back’s against the wall. Don’t you even know how to plead for your life?”

An icy voice. An overwhelming icy voice. I once again revised my assessment of this academy. Such tepid terms as training facility and boot camp were thoroughly inadequate. This was□quite literally…

A warzone.

“Now, out of respect for the fact that you seem to be my elder, I will, in my infinite mercy, offer you two choices□one is that you yield to me. The other is that I pull your shoulder out of its socket.”

“…Who died and made you king?”

“I’m no king, even if I have fought my way to the top of my little hill□I’m just a tactician who couldn’t make it on the front lines.”

“Perfect. A fitting opponent for a nonsense user who didn’t have the sense to learn some useful proverbs instead□”

Pain flared in my shoulder. Apparently she only liked jokes if she was the one telling them. Shiogi was self-centered like that. “There’s just one thing I don’t understand,” she said, loosening her hold on me a little. “And not understanding something□the presence of an uncertain element, in other words□to anathema to a tactician. Uncertainty breeds instability, after all.”

“…”

“Why were you able to infiltrate this academy?”

That was what Shiogi asked me. Not how, but why. Almost like it was a question that rocked the very foundations of her world, as if she wasn’t asking about my methods so much as questioning something much more fundamental.

“Nothing special. I had a fake student ID…and I was wearing a uniform, so no one caught on, that’s all.”

“Are you trying to tell me that was all it took to deceive the students of this academy? That our security system is that low-grade?”

Sure□with what I'd ended up learning about the true nature of Sumiyuri Academy, sorry, "Hang 'Em High," it was hard to believe my disguise could ever work. Even if I hid my gender by not speaking, it should've been child's play to see that I was an outsider. No wonder Shiogi was incredulous. But I had no answers to offer in the face of that incredulity. It was such a lucky break that I wondered about it myself.

"Don't tell me you're going to try and hand me some nonsense about it being a 'lucky break'…"

With those words, Shiogi wrenched my arm up once again. She seemed to be under the impression that she was regulating the amount of force she was applying, but on the receiving end it was unbearable. My other arm wouldn't reach her where she stood behind me□and she had my heels off the ground, so I couldn't counterattack with my legs. It was an impressive pinning technique, unthinkable for a novice.

A pinning technique. Which is exactly why there was a way to reverse it.

"It's terribly simple," I said quietly. "You just don't understand because you're a colossal moron, Shiogi."

I thought I could actually hear the blood rushing to her head. In the next instant Shiogi twisted my arm another quarter turn□and with a grrk, the bone in my shoulder came loose.

"What," a sound of shocked surprise emanated from none other than the person responsible for dislocating my shoulder.

Turning around the arm that she'd accidentally freed up by dislocating it, I faced Shiogi (yet to overcome her confusion at this turn of events), and with my un-dislocated arm I shoved her in the chest as hard as I could. However clever her words, her body was still only that of a teenage girl, and she flew back like a rotten tree, sprawling on the floor of the hallway in an ungainly heap.

"□ch!"

But she'd apparently managed to fall defensively, and sat up right away, glaring at me. I let her look roll off me like water off a duck's back, and leisurely spread my remaining good arm.

"I really don't have an answer for you other than 'luck,' Shiogi, but as for the other thing I'm sure you're wondering about last month I got involved in a certain incident. In the course of it, both my shoulders got dislocated. I forget how I ended up with those injuries, but…anyway, it becomes something of a habit. It's relatively easy for me, at this point."

"nkk," Shiogi groaned. "Then you provoked me on purpose and made me dislocate your"

"You called yourself a 'tactician,' right? I'm something like that myself, so I get it, I really do. When something you haven't planned for crops up, it totally throws you off. That shouldn't have been enough force to dislocate it I understand that feeling painfully well."

Nothing compared to the pain in my shoulder, of course, but I didn't let that show on my face. And while I was delivering this triumphant lecture, I was wondering: what do I do now? I'd somehow managed to escape her hold using an evasive maneuver that basically boiled down to a surprise attack, but it definitely hadn't defused the situation. In fact, it may have just added fuel to the fire. If I couldn't use my silver tongue to fast-talk my way out of this while Shiogi was still off balance

Then I couldn't go after the four who'd taken Hime-chan away.

"What am I, some kind of hero?" I muttered sarcastically to myself. Me, saving someone the very idea. I'd never even considered the possibility of such an opportunity presenting itself. Was I just going with the flow? Was I being carried along, not by sentiment but by circumstance, as per the usual?

Shiogi looked at me doubtfully, before her eyes momentarily went wide with shock. She was looking over my head, her gaze seemingly directed at something behind me.

“Really going above and beyond, huh, Iitan.”

With this nonchalant greeting, almost like we’d happened to run into each other on the street and were exchanging pleasantries—the speaker clapped me on the shoulder. It was the dislocated one, so it hurt like hell.

“That you…Aikawa?”

“How many times do I have to tell you—call me by my first name. Mm-kay?”

She gripped my shoulder harder.

“Right, of course—Jun.”

Aikawa remained behind me for the duration of this exchange, during which I never took my eyes off Shiogi, who, for her part, couldn’t meet my gaze. Of course she couldn’t; as a tactician, she would never allow herself such a pointless distraction. How could she permit herself the folly of looking anywhere else when humanity’s strongest was standing there before her?

“Hahaha—turned out I was anxious about you coming in here by your lonesome, so I figured I’d help out with the rescue.”

“Gimme a break… In that case, why not do it yourself in the first place?”

“We’ll leave that enjoyable little chat for later. So, what’re you getting into? Let’s see now. You’re, Shiogi, right? You know who I am?”

“Yes, I do.” Shiogi glared at Aikawa with a look so piercing that the one she’d given me during our confrontation couldn’t even compare. Apparently…she’d been holding back when she faced me, if only because she had still retained her composure. “The first lesson we’re given after we ‘matriculate’ is about Overkill Red, the

Subjugation in Scarlet.”

“What an honor,” Aikawa laughed mockingly. “And? What tactic will Shiogi the Tactician employ next?”

“I’m going to run away.”

With that brazen pronouncement, Shiogi leapt to her feet. There was not an ounce of fear or trepidation in either her attitude or her expression. In their place was indomitability—or rather insolence. It was the first time I’d ever seen an “enemy” take that attitude with Aikawa. And a child of tender years at that.

It was abnormal.

“You think you can get away?”

“I do—since Mr. Transvestite over there is injured,” sneered Shiogi. “And I’m well aware—that Overkill Red is soft on her friends.”

“…”

“And as for you,” Shiogi glared at me. “Please don’t ever forget—what you did to me.”

“Huh?”

Did I do something?

Aren’t I the one who had something done to him?

“Well then, it’s been a pleasure.”

And with that, Shiogi turned her back on us and dashed off, her skirt and long hair fluttering behind her. I was dead sure Aikawa would go after her—but she didn’t even move a muscle, she just stood there with her hand on my shoulder.

“Jun, are we just going to let her get—”

Flustered, I started to turn and face her, but—

“Maaasterrrr!”

I was prevented from doing so by Hime-chan, who appeared out of nowhere and flung herself bodily at me. However much of a lightweight she may've been, it was a total surprise attack, and she knocked me down onto the floor of the hallway.

What the hell is this little shit doing, trying to assassinate me? I thought, but…but there was no way I could say that to Hime-chan as she lay there atop me, massive tears streaming down her face.

"Waaaaa…aa." In between fits of sobbing, she felt around my dislocated shoulder. "Your shoulder… I'm so sorry, it's all Hime-chan's fault□Hime-chan was, Hime-chan's…"

"…"

You know, it hurts when you touch my dislocated shoulder like that□

Seriously, no seriously, is it really too much to ask, for you to pick up on that?

As she clung there, her arms wrapped around me, I noticed that the sleeve of her uniform was torn. Had it happened when those four tackled her? Naturally Aikawa had gone to rescue Hime-chan before she came to get me, so I assumed she'd driven off those four oddly named girls□nonetheless, it seemed Hime-chan hadn't gotten off scot-free.

"…, oh, th-this is totally no big deal!"

Having finally regained her composure, she noticed what I was looking at and tried to hide her torn sleeve.

"It's just an abrasion!"

"Sounds painful."

Though it just means a scratch.

"…"

Right.

She may've been boundlessly cheerful, sunny, innocent.

Naïve, pure as the driven snow, but still.

That didn't mean she was inconsiderate.

She was more worried about someone else than about herself. She felt another person's pain as her own. Even though it was meaningless to do so. It wasn't her fault I was injured, I'd done it to myself, but she wouldn't accept that. Uncompromisingly affirming, unconcerned with the particulars, embracing me, wrapping me in her arms□

No, hang on.

That was somebody else.

Not Hime-chan.

She and Hime-chan weren't the same person, and yet□

"W-Waaaa."

Apparently once again overwhelmed with emotion, Hime-chan clung to my shoulder in an attempt to hide her tears.

"I keep telling you, that hurts."

Not the same person, and yet.

Why this…

Tremulous, nonsensical joke of an emotion.

"Ichihime, get away from him. Are you trying to wreck Iitan's shoulder?" Aikawa grabbed Hime-chan by her sailor collar and forcefully pulled her off me, then pulled me up with the same force. "Going above and beyond is great and all, but don't overdo it, pal. Take it too far and it'll become chronic, that kind of dislocation. Here, I'll pop it back in for you, so hold still."

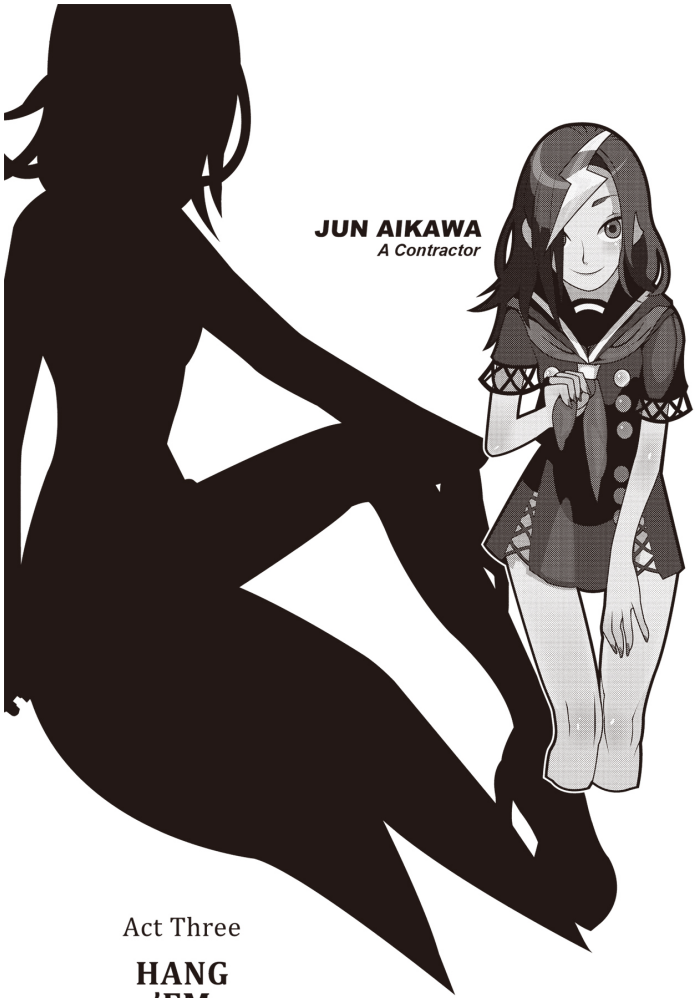
"…"

Hold still, she says□I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to. To be precise, from the instant Aikawa had entered my field of vision, my body had become totally rigid, almost as if some psychic had cast a malevolent spell on me.

A spell.

Definitely.

Jun Aikawa in a sailor outfit would have that effect on anyone.



Act Three

HANG 'EM HIGH

0

Art begins and ends with imitation.

1

Unnatural□in this situation, which of these was most unnatural?

Me, a nonsense user who was instead used nonsensically? A contractor who baselessly claims to be the world's strongest? Hime-chan, attempting to escape from this unorthodox academy? Shiogi and company trying to stop her? The thing is, within the confines of this school, inside the walls of "Hang 'Em High," none of these was conspicuously abnormal.

"'Kay. Back to business. Whadda we do now?" grumbled Aikawa, as she unfastened the scarf from her uniform and fashioned it into a triangular sling for my right arm. I say "grumbled," but she didn't seem worried or put out; her grumble seemed to be a grumble of enjoyment.

"Good question," I responded, though I was more focused on the thought that her high school girl look wasn't half bad. I'd 100 percent assumed there would be something off about it, but turns out that everything looks good on someone as gorgeous as Aikawa. How can I put this, yeah, life's a bitch.

"Since I let that tactician chick get away, I guess they must know

I'm here by now. I was hoping you'd make a better decoy, Iitan…"

"Oh…sorry about that, I blew it."

I apologized immediately, but did she just say something about a decoy?

"We're in troubles, huh. What're we to do?"

Hime-chan's half-baked addition to the conversation didn't register any sense of urgency either. It was like they both lacked any sense of danger whatsoever. Aikawa was one thing, but with Hime-chan that was a problem. Given how easily she'd just gotten captured, she didn't seem to possess any of Shiogi's combat ability.

"Or are you actually amazingly strong, Hime-chan?"

"Not at all. Hime-chan doesn't need strength."

"Because this is an age of knowledge?"

"That's right. A wise man once said…" Here Hime-chan did that gesture again where she whipped her finger up and snapped it down, before pointing it straight at me. "It's all in the mind!"

"…"

Don't you mean, "Knowledge is power?"

That was definitely not a wise pronouncement.

"Uh huh. Hime-chan's a washout, which is why I kind of started to hate school. So I wanted to drop out, but they wouldn't let me. It would've been nice if they'd just let me left on good terms, but there was something about a non-disclosure agreement or whatever. That's why Hime-chan asked Ms. Jun for help."

"Ask and ye shall receive."

"Ah ah ah, I don't want to hear that coming from youuu, Master!" She waggled her finger at me condescendingly. This girl had quite the abundant store of hand gestures. "Oh, and by the way.

Hagihara, from before, she's the number-one 'pupil' at this academy. She's a third-year, my senpai."

"Hmm…"

"So a little thing like a dislocated shoulder is nothing to beats yourself up about, Master. She may be a girl, but she's of a different caliber. Or no, not caliber, more like payload. No, no, more than that, we're talking megatons, she's nuclear…"

"…"

I was getting kind of irritated by this girl. Had her true nature been revealed by Aikawa's appearance? Was this the pain in the ass behind the curtain? What had those tears been all about?

"Hanh. Anyway, we'd better forget about breaking through their lines with a frontal assault," said Aikawa, tiredly pushing her bangs out of her face. "Shiogi Hagihara□nothing to fear just because she's top of her class, but either way, I have a hard time with that kind of person. I'd prefer to avoid dealing with her if possible."

"Oh, so that's why you let her get away? I didn't know there was any kind of person you had a hard time with, Jun."

"Well, there is. So self-confident even though she's got nothing□bursting with pride even though she's completely hollow□I'm no good with that kind of walking contradiction. I just don't get them." Aikawa turned to scrutinize me. "Should I be including you in that, Iitan?"

"Uh…no, you'd be saying me and Shiogi are birds of a feather."

Seemed to me Shiogi was more like Aikawa.

"Nah, that's just the recklessness of youth. My arrogance and her insolence are different things. You and her are birds of a feather, in that regard as well. Mirror images, insofar as you'll both end up caught in your own webs. Feh, tactician□what a laugh. All right. Would've been nice if you'd gotten Ichihime out of here for me, Iitan…but what can you do. Let's try the opposite of a textbook move."

“The opposite?” The polite prompt came from Hime-chan.

“What do you mean by that?” The dubious question came from me.

“Well, this might actually be the more legitimate tack□but we’ll take the fight to them. Instead of trying to force our way out, we’ll force our way in□to the faculty building, where we’ll have a tête-à-tête with the ‘Director.’ I’m talking about negotiating for Ichihime’s right to withdraw from the school.”

Nice and simple, right? said Aikawa, with a curl of her lip.

I couldn’t even manage to squeak out my surprise. And once again (I have no earthly idea how many times this made, but anyway, once again), I was filled with admiration for her. While I had spent my life thus far considering only how to outwit people and run away, she had lived hers thinking only of the exact opposite. Facing her opponents head on and declaring war, boldly and proudly marching forth to battle. Thinking only of that.

“But Ms. Jun□”

“It’s fine, Ichihime. I’ve never liked that woman. You don’t think too highly of her either, am I right? I’m actually glad to have a chance to put her down for the count. Right, now that that’s decided□let’s go.”

Having unilaterally decided to adopt her own plan, Aikawa started walking away; taken aback by this abrupt turn of events, Hime-chan and I scrambled to follow. It already seemed to have been tacitly settled who had the leading part here, and who were in the supporting roles.

In carriage, in conviction, and in deed.

Overwhelmingly mighty and stalwart as stone.

Her confidence and pride neither false nor unearned.

Jun Aikawa harbors no inconsistencies.

2

From there on out it was the Jun Aikawa show, and that's all that needs to be said about that.

One thing's for sure, there was nothing and no one, even in that academy, who could stand in her way. She took out every obstacle organic or inorganic with literally a single blow, mowing down, decimating, repulsing, and generally having her way with every single foe (all of whom appeared to be students of the academy) who tried to stop her, effortlessly running roughshod over the various traps that had been laid throughout the school building, and after all the hoopla, hullabaloo, and whoopdedoo was over, after the absolute force of the raging tempest had run its course□that is, running after the course of that raging tempest, we finally escaped the school building and followed the roofed walkway to the backdoor of the "faculty building."

She was so overwhelming that there's no point in trying to depict it; she made such a mockery of their resistance that it's beyond description. Hime-chan and I, who'd been scurrying every which way in the face of just a handful of students before Aikawa showed up, were rendered essentially superfluous.

"You say 'essentially,' Master, but I think we really are supersfluous. Hime-chan and Master have both been totally useless so far."

"In making objective observations of that sort, it's best to avoid direct means of expression. Vague language is the cornerstone of the nonsense user."

"Hime-chan isn't whatever kind of weirdo you're talking about."

Weirdo? Thanks a lot.

"But Ms. Jun's really something, isn't she. She got even better than

before. It's a beauty to see such a glad-hander at work."

"I think you mean you're glad to see such beautiful handiwork."

"Oh, you're right. You're the beauty, huh, Master."

"…Rude."

"Huh? Then you're denying it?"

"No… I mean, I won't not not not not admit that there might possibly be some aspect of the beauty in me."

"So which is it?"

"Will the pair of you shut up already?" Aikawa chided, idling in the entryway of the faculty building. "I'm thrilled that the two of you are getting along so well and all…but doesn't anything strike you as suspicious? I've been wondering about it ever since I got here."

"About what, exactly?"

"Doesn't it seem like everyone who's attacked us has been a student? Isn't that weird? It's not out of the question that they'd leave it to the students as a training exercise if it were just the two of you, but…me? Jun Aikawa? Sending the 'teachers' or 'security guards' after me would just be common courtesy, don'cha think?"

I couldn't decide if she was being judicious, or arrogant. But either way, it was true: all the people trying to stop us were young women, all of them wearing the same black uniform…that Hime-chan, myself, and Aikawa had on.

Wait a sec.

That I had on?

"Hey, Aikawa? Now that the cat's out of the bag, think I can change out of this outfit?"

"Ah… Come on, what's your problem? You look cute."

“But, I mean…”

“Aww. Iitan’s so moé!”

“…”

That made it hard to take off the uniform. Or rather, she was basically coercing me into keeping it on. I somehow felt like she was toying with me, but anyway, back to the real issue at hand.

On the plus side, Aikawa’s strategy of heading in, to strike at the core, instead of out in an attempt to escape was not what they’d be anticipating. It was what you might call a surprise offensive. They thought they were the pursuers that they were the predators. Which is exactly why they would never in a million years expect us to attack them. Even now, they probably thought we were just running around like chickens with our heads cut off trying to find a way out. In other words, they simply had an insufficient sense of urgency. Even up against Jun Aikawa, they hadn’t even considered the possibility that they might become the prey.

“’Spose so ach, what a pain.”

“A pain? Isn’t it better if it’s easy? Then they won’t brought out the big guns.”

“That’s not what I was talking about, Ichihime ”

Aikawa drew one foot all the way back and kicked in the iron door just like that. It crashed to the ground with a CLANG…must’ve been pretty rusted out. Had to be.

“I meant that it’s a pain having to bust down the door like this. So we can creep in through this rear emergency entrance like a bunch of sneaky cockroaches. Damn thing didn’t even have a keyhole.”

“…”

A-ha, apparently Aikawa would’ve rather marched straight in through the front door, announcing her name for all to hear. Instead we managed to get all the way here incognito, without a single “teacher” showing up. She seemed disappointed that, since

we hadn't been discovered, we had to use the back door. Always wanting to be in the spotlight.

"Pretty sure the Director's office is on the top floor. She sure loves high places c'mon, follow me."

Aikawa, who naturally possessed a perfect memory (unlike me), had the layout of the school perfectly memorized. She hustled up the emergency stairs like she owned the place. "Oooh, a friend in high places is a friend indeed!" Hime-chan followed after her, mumbling another of her mysterious pseudo-aphorisms.

"We've got to avoid the staff room… Ach, what a pain in the ass. I don't give a shit about schemes or traps, so go ahead: use your numbers and your supplies and your advantageous position, get up on your high horse and come at me!"

"If they do, we won't have a chaaance."

I don't know what kind of history Aikawa and Hime-chan shared, but from this frivolous back and forth it seemed like they were quite close. Despite not having seen each other in a while, there was none of the expected awkwardness or distance, and, come to think of it, nor had there been anything said about friendship neglected, no attempt to thaw old acquaintance. Which conversely seemed to demonstrate the intimacy between them. Aikawa obviously has a big-sisterly disposition, and Hime-chan is very much the type who stimulates a desire to protect, so in a certain sense they were a perfect fit for each other.

"Hunh?"

Hang on. In that case, wasn't I a pretty irrelevant character in this little scene? I wasn't wild about that. Especially when I'd had to dress up like this. With my raison d'être hanging in the balance, I decided to ask Aikawa a question.

"Um, Jun, from what you were saying before, it seems like the Director is an acquaintance of yours. So, what kind of a person is she?"

At that point the only thing I could imagine was a real villain. Gathering up innocent young girls and giving them this kind of special education. That's one hell of a harem.

"Name's Noa Origami, she'll be thirty-nine years old this year."

"That surname, Origami…"

Uh huh, Aikawa nodded without turning around. "Akagami, Iigami, Ujigami, Ekagami, and Origami. The bloodlines that represent the progeny of the so-called Four Gods and One Mirror. Then again, Noa's not a direct descendant, she's from a collateral branch, so her connection to the main family is weak. Which means that this academy itself has only a tenuous relationship with the Origami clan. Probably closer to Rule, actually."

"Rule… Isn't that Japan's ER3?"

ER3 was more like a community while Rule was more of a network, but what they actually did wasn't too different. So this place was something like the ER3's feeder program…maybe?

"Bingo. Forty percent of the graduates go on to Rule. The rest, it depends… I guess the valedictorian or whatever might go to ER3. Since they've got the higher brand recognition. Seems like that Hagihara chick might be headed in that direction, don'cha think?"

Of course Aikawa (unlike me) would know all about the academy's internal affairs, and about its "graduates." Hm, to put it in more everyday terms, they seemed to be "cultivating human resources," more or less. In that sense it really was a training facility, and the term "educational institution" wasn't so far off the mark after all.

And yet. A school where no one's allowed to drop out, where they nab you if you try to run away, where students refer to themselves as tacticians, a school which they themselves deride as Hang 'Em High□can you really call that an educational institution?

"Originally, Sumiyuri□Hang 'Em High's parent organization was established by Noa's mother. Back then, though, it was a relatively…only in comparison to now, of course, but it was a

relatively normal school. A year and a half ago, her mother hanged herself. And after Noa took over, things went off the rails. It's difficult to say exactly how—"

"It's was the air itself," said Hime-chan, in an unusually crisp tone. She had her back to me so I couldn't see her expression—but I'm pretty sure it had turned gloomy again. She was a second-year now, so the new Director had probably already taken over by the time she started here.

"I put up with it for a while after I 'matriculated,' even though it was an awful place. But things just kept getting more and more outs of whack… Hime-chan wouldn't call a place where your friends die a 'school.'"

"Damn right," seconded Aikawa, fiercely stroking Hime-chan's head, then picked up where the girl had left off. "But you know, it's impossible to tell that it's gone off the rails until you see it from the outside. With no point of comparison, you can't distinguish normal and abnormal, so it's only natural to see yourself as normal. And a school is a locked room that you can't see into from the outside. The insanity works its way deep, deep inside—it gets out of hand, and now here we are."

"Is there anyone else, Hime-chan? Any other students who think this is 'abnormal,' 'off the rails'? Students who want out of a school like this?"

"Used to be."

Those few blunt words were more than enough to shut me up.

"Despite what I said earlier…I don't actually hate Noa Origami all that much. Sure, she rubs me the wrong way, that much is true. I need to have a word with her. She can't view human beings as anything but numbers, she can't view people's deaths as anything but statistics. One person dead just means two people aren't dead. She thinks numbers are everything. But you know…it's not like I can't understand her vision."

"You…used to be friends, huh."

“Kind of. Though we had a falling out two years back.”

So this is our two-year reunion, joked Aikawa. Though the humor seemed somehow forced. I had no idea why Aikawa, who was worlds better at deceiving people than even this humble nonsense user, would put on that little performance for us.

“Listen, Jun. Please don’t let your feelings get the better of you.”

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to? The point of this conversation is to secure Ichihime Yukariki’s autonomy to drop out. I’m on top of it.”

“Glad to hear it.” I stretched languidly, feeling like a man who’d carried out his duties in good order, then said to Hime-chan, who’d been silent for a while, “Hey, when you get out of here, what’re you gonna do?”

“Good question,” Hime-chan replied. “I want to have a tons of fun.” Somehow this made it sound like she’d never done anything “fun” in her entire life. “I want a fun life where every days is Monday.”

“Sounds terrible.”

I let this sincere rejoinder slip, but my mind was elsewhere. It was stimulated. The weakest part of me□the nostalgic part, was being painstakingly and meticulously stimulated. Seriously…it’s not even that they were similar. They were the same, Hime-chan and her. In which case□I thought. Isn’t this a chance for repentance, a chance to wipe away my sins? I didn’t really think I could cancel out having broken a person by rescuing someone else□I didn’t even know how to go about rescuing someone, but□

“Don’t let your mind wander, nonsense user,” Aikawa slammed the door on my reverie. “Would you look at that, here we are at the top floor.”

She got the emergency door open without difficulty. Jun Aikawa, the all-around contractor, the jack-of-all-trades who had reached the pinnacle of achievement in every possible skillset. Be it mindreading, vocal mimicry, or opening locks, there was no one

better.

We hadn't gotten very far down the corridor when we came to a truly imposing door. Not the kind of thing that would ever be installed in a mere school. Forget about bulletproof, this iron door, this blast door, looked as if it could withstand a thermonuclear attack.

Aikawa gave a perfunctory knock (seemed like knocking was in vogue with her), but there was no response. Of course not. Well then, I thought, reaching for the doorknob only to discover that this great iron door didn't even have one. No knob, and, like the backdoor downstairs, not even a keyhole. In its place there was a biometric hand scanner.

"Tch. Even I can't do anything about this."

"Really?"

"Even I can't change my fingerprints, ya know. Himecchi. What's the deal here?"

"All the doors in the faculty building are the sames," Hime-chan gave a thorough explanation once prompted. "Only the teachers themselves can lock and unlock them. You put your hand on the scanner, right, and it locks. Then you do the same, and it unlocks."

"Hanh. So no chance of a master key, huh… Wish we'd brought Kunagisa along."

True, if Kunagisa were here, she could work some computer magic and take care of this in no time.

Which reminds me, did Kunagisa know what was really going on at this academy? When she was telling me about this place, she didn't say a word about it. But she wouldn't want to tell me about that kind of thing, so it's possible she knew and just kept quiet. Either way, it was no wonder she hadn't been able to get her hands on a uniform. Now I realized why she'd been so quick to let it go.

Hunh? But then, how did Aikawa get her hands on a uniform (and not just one, but two)?

…Did she make them herself?

“Can you lock it normally from the inside?”

“I’m trying to remember. I think so, but I’m not sure.”

“Yeah? Then, maybe she’s in and just pretending that nobody’s home… Gimme a goddamn break.”

At that point, I finally noticed that there was a surveillance camera behind us. I informed Aikawa in a panic, but she dismissed it out of hand: “The circuit’s already been cut.” True, in spite of being a surveillance camera, it didn’t seem to be doing any surveilling.

“I took the liberty of attending to all those little details before I came to save you guys… I cut the alarms too. Quit worrying so much. Ah, shit. Does this mean we can’t get inside?”

“But you knocked and no one answered, so doesn’t that mean the Director isn’t in there?”

“Nah, Noa’s like me, she’s not interested in running away. She planning on holing up for a siege? Or is she just ignoring me… Either way, one thing’s for sure: she’s trying to make me look stupid.”

Okay, now I’m pissed, Aikawa muttered, the determination clear in her voice, and produced some kind of black lump from her uniform. It was a squarish object, small enough to fit perfectly in the palm of one’s hand: the thing colloquially known as a stun gun. Its chunky look was enough to make anyone instinctually fearful.

“Ms. Jun, it’s rare to see you with a weapon.”

“Yep. This is a special occasion. Since the need arose to get a certain person out of here in one piece□but anyway. Here we go…”

Aikawa pressed the tip of the stun gun against the biometric scanner and turned it on. Electric sparks flew and everything went crazy, then an instant later a dull BABABA sound rang out. When my vision returned to normal, the scanner had been pulverized. A noxious trail of smoke was rising from it.

“Wow, that thing’s powerful…”

“Yup. I had it made special. And that was with the limiter on. Give someone a dose of this bad boy, and the shock’s liable to erase their memory of the last two or three days.”

So Aikawa claimed, but she must’ve been exaggerating. What kind of chump would lose their memory because of a little thing like that?

Aikawa peered perfunctorily into the guts of the scanner.

“Mm-hmm, fried those circuits good. The rest is a cakewalk… Come on, Maijin circuits? Guaranteed mediocrity. Okay, just gimme a sec.”

Aikawa shoved her hand inside the scanner, and just kind of swirled the contents around with her bare hand. She seemed to be begging for an electric shock, but knowing Aikawa, maybe she had some kind of special dermal coating? At last she said, “There. Unlocking complete,” and opened the door. I had assumed it would be automatic, given how massive it was, but seemingly that function had gone down when she fried the circuit board.

“Unh. Heavy bastard…”

She began pulling at the door with both hands, and slowly but surely it opened, sending an ominous slithering sound very unlike that of a door opening echoing down the hallway.

“…”

What an insane feat of strength. She certainly didn’t seem like someone who was about to engage in negotiations. She was clearly spoiling for a fight with the person in that room. Aikawa was pretty belligerent and hot-blooded, and I felt a little frustrated at the thought that it might come to that after all. Dammit, why couldn’t she learn a thing or two from ol’ no longer human? He was a really good guy.

“Geez, Ms. Jun, still as headstrong as ever.”

Even Hime-chan, a real Aikawa adherent, looked astonished at her behavior. Though her astonished look also contained a certain sense of relief, as if she wouldn't be Jun Aikawa otherwise.

Once the door was halfway open, Hime-chan and I followed Aikawa into the Director's office□

And there discovered the dismembered corpse of Noa Origami, divided into twelve pieces.

"…" "…" "…"

Chest, abdomen, pelvic region, left and right arms and hands, left and right thighs, and left and right lower legs□the former constituents of Noa Origami's body had been rent apart and now lay scattered around the room in a truly ghastly, truly atrocious fashion. The stench of blood, the stench of cerebral fluid, the stench of gore. Every inch of the luxurious carpet and every piece of furniture was drenched in blood. It was a wonder the stench hadn't escaped the room.

And Noa Origami's head□was hanging from the ceiling, her long black hair tied to the fluorescent light.

It was a scene out of a nasty snuff film. The face attached to Origami's head possessed a youthfulness that belied her thirty-nine years, but what did that matter now?

A severed head hanging from the ceiling. How could one feel anything other than terror and shock?

"Did you□" said Aikawa in a quiet voice, suppressing her emotions. "Did you see anyone leave this room?"

Silently I shook my head. Hime-chan did likewise. None of us looking at each other. We were nailed to the spot by the sight of that dismembered corpse, as if nails had literally been driven through our feet.

“Ha. What a laugh,” spat Aikawa, her voice barely audible, before she began moving around the room. Her shoes were getting covered in blood and gore, but she didn’t seem to care at all. Under the desk, inside the sofa…she examined every possible hiding place in turn.

Next she walked past me, heading towards the door. I tagged along to have a look. She seemed to be inspecting the locking mechanism. She had only destroyed the exterior one, and its interior counterpart seemed to be relatively intact.

“Mm-hm, mm-hm… Interesting. Well, can’t be helped.”

As Aikawa muttered this, it finally dawned on me that the mutilated corpse was lying there in full view of Hime-chan. That’s, I mean, it’s too□but her eyes were ice cold as she gazed at the head suspended from the ceiling.

“Ahhh…” Hime-chan exhaled.

As if she were about to follow it up with a muttered kicked the bucket, huh or something. Like the reaction you might have to learning that something you had absolutely no personal interest in but were aware was important had in fact disappeared a long time ago.

“…So it’s finally started.”

“Hime-chan.”

“No need for concern, Master.” She looked at me and smiled a melancholic, troubled smile. “Hime-chan may be a washout, but I’m still a student here. Something like this doesn’t shock me.”

“Right. Fine then.”

It wasn’t fine. It wasn’t fine at all. But it wasn’t my place to step in. It wasn’t my place. I couldn’t step in□to Hime-chan’s mind. All I had to do was ask the simple question, “What’re you thinking about right now?” and it would all be swept away, but I couldn’t ask it.

Because getting real with people, interacting without any nonsense

or disingenuous kindness, meant hurting each other. I didn't want to hurt Hime-chan with a clumsy intrusion—and most of all I didn't want to get hurt myself.

Any more than I already had been. In this kind of circumstance.

There was a loud clang behind me.

It was the sound of Aikawa shutting the door.

"This is an unfortunate turn of events—don'cha think?"

"It sure is…" I replied. As a means of distracting myself from my thoughts. "I can't believe the Director's been…murdered. This means that all the danger we faced to get here was—"

"That's not what I'm getting at. Forget about that. It just means we need to choose a different approach. And there's a more than limitless supply of possible means for achieving our goal. Dammit—I thought it was too easy getting here. So that's how it is. I guess the order for this must've come from somewhere."

"What do you mean?"

"Iitan. What's on my mind right now—is the fact that this is a locked-room murder."

"Haah?" I accidentally let slip a moronic ejaculation.

But she was right. I mean, definitely, the door was controlled by a biometric handprint, and when we forced it open, there was a dismembered corpse and a head hanging from the ceiling—yeah. The door didn't appear to have an auto-locking function, so the term "locked-room murder" did seem applicable. But what did that even matter? The problem was that, with Director Noa Origami murdered, we couldn't negotiate with her, we couldn't do anything at all to oppose her—

"This is no time to be discussing something as inconsequential as a locked room, is it? Are you feeling rattled because someone you knew's been killed? Shake it off, Aikawa, it's not like you—"

“Don’t call me by my last name. Only my ‘enemies’ do that,” Aikawa glared at me. “I’m cool as a cucumber. Listen, Iitan. The fact that I usually call locked rooms inconsequential or whatever isn’t just a personal prejudice, okay? They’re meaningless, so I just laugh at ’em, that’s all. Take that incident on Wet Crow’s Feather Island back in April. What possible meaning could that locked room have had? That was just a case of ‘I wanted it to be a locked room so I turned it into a locked room,’ right? What I’m after now isn’t the necessity for it, it’s the meaning behind it. Putting yourself above suspicion by drawing attention to the fact that you couldn’t have done it is certainly a clever ploy, but no matter what you do or how you do it, an absence of proof doesn’t constitute proof of your absence. That kind of trick really is meaningless. In the end you’ll get caught in your own web.”

Totally. But.

“But this time it’s incredibly meaningful,” Aikawa went on. “It’s got all the meaning in the world. Listen up, how did we get into this room?”

“You broke the lock.”

“Yup. Clearly an act of ‘trespassing’… The act of a suspicious ‘trespasser,’ attempting to escape from this academy. And in the room, a butchered corpse. There’s an obvious suspect in that situation, wouldn’t you say?”

“Ah.”

That’s what she meant by meaningful…

In other words, whoever created this situation had succeeded in framing us for the crime. By concocting a locked-room set up. She was right. Under the circumstances, what other suspect could there possibly be?

“Jun, this means…”

“We’ve been fucked, is what it means.”

And yet Aikawa didn’t seem at all humiliated by this. In fact, she

seemed impressed by the person who had arranged it. “Seriously, what a laugh,” she said with a cynical sneer.

No…hang on a sec. It was just as bad as Aikawa said, or, even worse. A sense of impending crisis finally overrode my confusion. It was bad enough that Shiogi and her cohort were after us, but now we’d been made the prime suspects in the Director’s murder

“What a way to go,” Aikawa muttered. She began picking up the scattered pieces of the dismembered Director. “These wounds are pretty ragged. A blade…or maybe a chainsaw? Yeah, that seems more likely. It’s a big job, dismembering a person like this.”

“You’re probably right, there are bits of flesh scattered everywhere,” chimed in Hime-chan. “Doesn’t it seem like she was hung from the ceiling and then chopped up with the chainsaw?”

They were both talking about it so blithely but what a horrible conversation. A chainsaw? Taking something like that, to someone’s body…

“Could a fluorescent light like that hold a person’s weight?”

“Sure, if you distributed its properly…I think.”

“Dammit, you’ve really done it now, Noa.”

Aikawa spoke not to me nor to Hime-chan, but to the head of Noa Origami where it hung suspended in the center of the room. Naturally there was no reply, but Aikawa continued undaunted. With a smile that, from a certain angle looked just a little bit sad.

“And you were this close to realizing your ‘vision,’ weren’cha… Things don’t always work out the way we hope. Which is what keeps things interesting, though I doubt you’d understand what I mean by that… There was something I wanted to say to you…but oh well. All is forgiven.”

Then Aikawa crouched for a second before leaping up and undoing Origami’s hair where it was fastened to the fluorescent light. The head thudded heavily to the ground, and Aikawa picked it up and put it with the rest of the body parts.

“Hm. Nothing seems to be missing…some of the joints, maybe. Well now…” And here she□Jun Aikawa□smiled the most, and I mean the most, wicked, vicious, horrible smile I had ever seen on her face. “Things just got fucking interesting.”

Act Four

THE DARK KNIFE RISES

0

Ask God for the details.

1

And three hours later—after everything had gone dark, Ichihime Yukariki, Jun Aikawa, and I were still in the Director's office. I had already gotten used to the stench of blood and gore and finally managed to come to terms with the bizarre scene laid out before my eyes. Not that they were terms I wanted to come to, mind you.

As to what Hime-chan thought of this situation, she was waggling her finger around, whipping it up and snapping it down again as always. It looked like she was just at loose ends, but maybe she was pondering something.

Aikawa was Aikawa, so she was eating whatever she'd been able to find on the office shelves. At present she was munching on some fancy-looking sweets. How could she eat something like that here, under these circumstances? Did she have nerves of steel, or just a lot of nerve? Hard to tell.

"Jun. How long do you plan on staying here like this?"

"Huh? How many times are you gonna ask me that?" Putting a cookie between her teeth, she crawled over on all fours and stopped right in front of my face. "What? Aren't you hungry? I get it, I get

it, you get grumpy when you're hungry."

"That's not□"

"Okay, open wide!"

Aikawa tossed the half-eaten cookie into my open mouth.

Delicious.

"□That's not it! We have no idea how close Shiogi and company are, but we're still just sitting here□if we stay at the scene of the crime, won't that make us even more suspect?"

"Man, I don't get you. Why're you so negative, always pooh-poohing this, that, and the other? Prince Pessimist over here. Ichihime, you tell him."

"Master. Good things come to those who vote."

"I have no idea what that's supposed to mean."

Come on, is she doing it on purpose?

"Point is, Iitan. The worst thing we can do in this situation is act rashly. To put it in shogi terms, this was a 'masterstroke,' okay? It ain't checkmate yet, but we're in a real pinch. These situations call for lengthy consideration."

"But isn't a bad idea worse than whatever whatever?"

"Yep. So take a breather. In other words, don't panic," said Aikawa, before flinging herself down on the floor. Sure, it was dry by this point, but lying down on that blood-soaked carpet didn't seem to me like the act of someone in her right mind.

"Can't we just leave it to the police?"

"The police aren't coming. None of the characters involved in this are on the straight-and-narrow, never mind the school itself. This tale isn't poor Sasaki's time to shine."

“None? But I’m a regular civilian. Don’t drag me into it. At least as far as this particular affair goes, I’m a total outsider. This is what the police are for. Why else do I pay taxes?”

“You pay taxes? That’s rough, you’re still a minor. But listen, Iitan. You seem to’ve forgotten something. The cops are fundamentally a publicly traded company. They’re the friends of whichever fine citizens pay the most taxes.”

Ah. Right, the academy had the intimate backing of both the Origami name and Rule… Compared to that, my taxes didn’t amount to a piss in the ocean. In which case, no chance of Sasaki and her partner making an appearance. Those two would definitely be out of their depth anyway.

“You’ve convinced me…but that doesn’t answer my question: how long are we going to stay here?”

“Thing is, I repaired the door so it’ll lock again, which makes this room the safest possible place for us. This is the safe haven of Hang ’Em High’s eminent Director, after all. Sound-proof, germ-proof, bullet-proof, what safer place could there be?”

“But the Director was murdered in here…”

Aikawa’s definition of “safe” seemed to encompass a psychological sense in addition to a physical one. And it was true, even the Buddha himself wouldn’t expect the fugitive Ichihime Yukariki and her troop to be hunkered down in the heart of the school, and in the Director’s office directly above the “staff room” at that. In that sense, biding our time in this room could qualify as “outwitting our opponents.”

But if you asked me□that’s not what I would call it. Doing the unexpected, deliberately making an odd move, doesn’t constitute outwitting someone. That’s simply moving into someone’s blind spot. And if you move rashly into a “place” like a blind spot, you in fact become unable to move out again. You’re stuck in your place of refuge. I’ve experienced it before, so I know of what I speak. Not that she didn’t know a hell of a lot better than me.

Plus, there was one other thing that was bothering me—just as much as the locked-room murder of Noa Origami.

“Guess we managed to wrap things up before ‘Zigzag’ was deployed—”

Shiogi’s muttered words—those muttered words she let slip having momentarily forgotten that I was nearby, whether out of negligence or a sense of security, I couldn’t say.

“Zigzag”—no way that was a new model of Mobile Suit. In which case there seemed to be something inside this academy that even Shiogi the tactician hoped to keep sealed away.

“Listen, buddy… For someone who likes to keep things vague, you’re awfully fixated on getting results,” said Aikawa, sounding fed up.

“What do you mean? I can’t let that pass, even from you.”

“Didn’t you say something once about being ‘used to waiting’? Yeah, you really are a patient guy. If the waiting game was an actual game, I bet you’d win it hands down. But that’s only when you know what the outcome’ll be. When you can’t see what’s coming, you get anxious. Even though waiting is your forte, you’re no good at waiting for something if you don’t know what it is.”

“You’re talking like you know it all.”

“I’m talking out of my ass. ‘Resignation’ and ‘compromise’ are at the root of everything you do. So a situation like this, where you don’t know what to give up on or who to pander to, is, to put it bluntly, tough for you. But ya know, well, that’s the thing. You gotta try, gotta give it your best shot.”

Apparently she really had gotten fed up, because her speech started to lose momentum halfway through. I mean, you can tell me to give it my best shot all you want, but I still have no idea what I’m supposed to be giving it to.

“Jun, Master, we mustn’t fight amongst ourselves,” Hime-chan stepped in to mediate. “Let’s all try to get along. The three of us

can’t get out of sync with each other now.”

“Ain’t it the truth. Ah, such a beautiful thing is friendship. Listen, Iitan, if you wanna leave this room, go ahead. I’m not trying to confine you or keep you here. Even if I’m trying to keep people out, I have no intention of trying to keep anyone in. If you go, though, you go of your own volition, so don’t count on my protection afterward.”

“…”

“But listen, Iitan, and listen good. All the other peaceniks in this country may have their heads in the sand, but the people here in this academy have turned their backs on the path of humanity and set out on a more dangerous road, whether because they have goals, or convictions, or because they have no choice.”

“Turned their backs, on the path of humanity?”

“You think this place is a training facility or a boot camp or something, Iitan, and it is. But it has another role as well, a more important one: it’s a front. A front—in other words, the best students here also comprise a tactical combat unit.”

Then…forget about a school, we’re talking about a full-on private militia. A tactical combat unit of teenage girls. No need to ask What year is it, anyway? Of course the setting is today. But, but…

“If you underestimate them because they’re girls and they’re younger than you, you’re in for a rude awakening. As long as you and Ichihime are in this room, I, Jun Aikawa, can guarantee your safety, so siddown and shaddup. I’ve had enough fun for one day.”

“What about you, Hime-chan?” I turned the conversation to her. “Do you have an opinion…or any suggestions? In terms of knowing the terrain, you’ve been a student here for a little over a year, right?”

“Uhhh. Hime-chan thinks there’s no problem with leaving everything to Ms. Jun. I’m a washout, I don’t amount to much, and Master is an amateur at this kinds of thing. So I think we should

follow the advice of the professional."

She was right. So right that it made me sick. Not that I've ever been left feeling refreshed and invigorated by someone being right.

"And I think it's true that this place is safe. You might call this room a sort of secret cemetery in the heart of Hang 'Em High."

"You mean sanctuary." Though the words are kind of similar, I must admit. "Don't amount to much, huh… I have to say that if you can make that kind of level-headed judgment about yourself, maybe there's no need to be so self-deprecating."

"I'm not being self-deprecating. People are weirdly liable to lose control when they're 'strong' or whatever, and that's no good for anyone. Hime-chan strikes exactly the right balance."

Lose control□yeah.

They lose control, then lose perspective, and eventually someone loses their life.

Indeed…I know countless people who've been driven crazy by their own needlessly excessive "strength"□or ability. Those geniuses on the island, Mr. No Longer Human, the list goes on. In terms of someone who has the power to take on the whole world but manages to maintain her equilibrium without a hint of anything having gone awry□there's Aikawa, and that's about it.

"Not to blow myself up, but Hime-chan thinks weakness is something to be proud of."

"You're a terrorist?"

Blow my own horn, she meant. Not that it martyrs anyway.

"Balance, huh□"

Then, what about me? Aikawa was right: so self-confident even though I've got nothing□bursting with pride even though I'm completely hollow□a "walking contradiction." No way around it, my equilibrium is as bad as can be. But I'm not crazy. I'm not. I

think. I'm pretty sure I'm not.

"I hope not, anyway," I muttered, and finally let it drop with my usual, "It's all nonsense anyway."

2

Let's say for the sake of argument that there was a nonsense user who believed that killing was wrong. How would he respond to these questions?

"What's wrong with killing people on the battlefield?"

"What's wrong with a serial killer killing people?"

He would probably answer like this: the very existence of battlefields and serial killers themselves is wrong. Okay then, what about these questions?

"Is it wrong for a dog to kill someone?"

"Is it wrong for an earthquake to kill people?"

Would he say that the very existence of dogs and earthquakes was wrong? Not a chance, that would be mere sophistry. Reasons that come from conviction and convictions that come from reason are completely different things.

It is a firm and unassailable fact that there exist situations, circumstances, where one must kill. Yes, a reason to kill someone always exists as a certainty. Even when there's no reason why you can't kill someone, there is always reason to kill someone. So the important thing is to live out your days creeping around trying to avoid ending up with such a reason□and at that point in my thought process, I slowly opened my eyes.

Another hour had passed□Hime-chan was waggling her finger around as always (did it entertain her?), Aikawa was fast asleep where she had plopped herself down□and I got to my feet.

"Huh? Where's you going, Master?"

“…The bathroom.”

“Understood. I’ll go with you.”

Don’t be ridiculous.

Reining her in as she started to stand up, I told Hime-chan the truth: “I’m going to strike out on my own, if you don’t mind.”

“On your own?”

“Yeah. Sorry, but I’m sick of playing detective.” I bobbed my head at her. Then, undoing the triangular sling Aikawa had made for me, I released my injured arm. “It’s like Aikawa said, I don’t seem to be able to handle it when I ‘can’t see what’s coming.’ It’s a new discovery for me. Though Shiogi said something about how ‘not understanding something’ makes her anxious… So maybe it’s something like that. I don’t mind vagueness, but I don’t much care for uncertainty… I guess I really am inflexible. Anyway, I’ve hit my limit, I can’t wait around here like this anymore.”

“That’s…” Hime-chan pursed her lips and looked up at me accusingly. “Samurai down, Master!”

Was she telling me to commit ritual suicide, because I was running away from battle?

No…she probably just meant to say simmer down.

“That doesn’t make any sense! Don’t you understand that if you stay with Ms. Jun, you’ll be absolutely safe? Even getting out of the academy will be easy if we just leave everythings to her. Now that we’ve managed to get them in a stalemate, why do you need to go acting so recklessly?”

“I don’t feel like arguing about it.”

“Too bad, because you’re going to listen to what I have to say. If you go off like a loose cannon, Master, it’ll endanger Hime-chan and Ms. Jun. As long as we’re a team, your everequal and opposite reaction directly affects our prospects.”

It was a serious moment, so I didn't bother to correct her.

"I've considered that. Hime-chan. In this situation it's actually better if I'm not here. You put it very aptly yourself: you're not good for much—but I'm good for less than that, I'm a total amateur. Your best bet is to get rid of the dead weight."

"That's just—"

"One thing's for sure," I said over the end of her sentence, squashing her counterargument. "It may well be that it wouldn't make much of a difference to Aikawa. My weight probably doesn't mean much to her, dead or otherwise. But—here's what occurred to me. No, what I realized—no, no, what finally dawned on me, I guess you could say. As long as I'm with Aikawa, I'm safe. Not only that, it could even start to make me feel a little cocky. The thought of being on the side of humanity's strongest really fires me up—but that's a problem. I don't want to be fleeing the battlefield because of that."

A blood-soaked room. Covered in gore. The assembled pieces of Noa Origami. The world's strongest, sleeping so peacefully on the floor that I couldn't even hear her breath. And in that environment, a nineteen-year-old straggler and a seventeen-year-old deserter were having this childish argument. Dammit, if this wasn't comical, what was? If this couldn't be called buffoonery, what could?

"In which case—I'm nothing but a thief. I'm the lowest of the low, slinking around and somehow managing to stay alive. 'Aikawa's so strong that it's nothing for her to parcel this out to me'—that's the kind of grubby little parasite I am, no sense of crime and no feel for punishment. There's been a lot going on lately, so I totally let it slip my mind. What kind of life I had chosen for myself."

I don't provide anyone with anything.

So I don't accept anything from anyone.

I refuse anything and everything. That…was just about the last source of dignity I had left.

“Aikawa’s job this time around was to rescue you… It’s got nothing to do with me. This is absolutely, totally, positively someone else’s affair, and I’m only in the way. And that’s no good at all. I…don’t want to repay kindness with injury.”

I may not have much in the way of strength of purpose.

But a certain mulish pride, that much I’ve got.

“But, Master□”

“You’d better stop calling me that. I’ll never be able to be friends with someone like Aikawa. There’s no reason for you to call me that.”

I casually brushed her off, and for a moment Hime-chan looked hurt. I headed for the door, which could easily be unlocked from the inside. Though the mechanism had been destroyed by the jolt of electricity, of course, so it had to be done with brute strength.

Being protected by Aikawa. Which isn’t even a burden for her. Protecting Hime-chan. Feeling the desire to protect her, feeling fulfilled by that. Clasping hands. Becoming friends, cooperating.

I get it now, what a dreamy relationship.

So that’s exactly what it is: a dream.

A dream is just a dream, after all.

“But, um…Mast, er.”

“I told you to stop calling me that… Better learn some manners, kid.” I turned around, and put my hand on Hime-chan’s shoulder. Squeezing it a little□to demonstrate my refusal. “Please stop expecting me to be nice to you. Don’t expect to get close to me. That kind of thing□rubs me the wrong way.”

“□Ah.”

Hime-chan shrunk from my words.

Look how easy it is.

How easy it is to break someone's trust.

Tenuous goodwill crumbles so easily,

And once again I'm on my own.

"I'm sick of pretending to be friends. This is my way of running away, Hime-chan. Just like you're doing. Then again, our opponents may be a little thrown off because of it□so you and Aikawa should feel free to do whatever you want in that window."

"Why… Why are you acting so distant, likes we were strangers?"

"Because we are strangers."

"But Ms. Jun□"

"I don't want to get in Jun Aikawa's way. Even if I wouldn't make for much of an impediment."

I was playing up the stoicism a bit, to be honest, but that was just my mulishness again. Putting an end to the conflict between resignation and compromise.

Do you not understand what I'm saying?

Do you not understand where I'm coming from?

Do you not understand me?

Hime-chan.

That's a truly wonderful thing.

It goes without saying that Hime-chan was right. I was in the wrong. I couldn't have been more blatantly wrong. But□I had hit my limit. This was the limit for wrong me doing the right thing. I had no way of explaining that I had crossed a threshold. And I had no interest in explaining it in the first place.

Yup, that's how it was in the end.

The nonsense user refuses to make friends, even with Jun Aikawa.

“But, but□”

“Okay then, bye-bye.”

Without waiting to hear the rest of what Hime-chan was going to say, I closed the door. Aikawa was one thing, but with those skinny arms and that slender frame, there was no way Hime-chan was up to the task of opening it. Even once Aikawa had woken up, I had no expectation that she’d come and save me if I decided to go off on my own. She’d said so herself. I mean, who knows, maybe she wasn’t even asleep now. I’m sure she has no problem feigning sleep. Deception is her stock in trade.

Just like that pantomime routine she used to get me here.

“The crazy thing is, it doesn’t make me dislike her even a tiny bit…”

That’s probably because I like Aikawa, from the bottom of my heart. I like her, though that’s worlds away from liking her.

“…”

Nevertheless. I couldn’t see myself being good-natured enough to lounge around carefree and comfortable now that I’d finally cottoned on to the fact that she’d deceived me.

As for Hime-chan. Ichihime Yukariki.

When I realized that if I wasn’t careful, I could get that girl caught up in it□what I was doing took on at least a smidgen of meaning. I laughed at myself even as I thought this, amused that I had ended up with so much sympathy for this girl I had only met a few hours ago. Was it just that I conflated Hime-chan with “her”? I didn’t want to think so. But either way, I couldn’t draw a bystander any further into my private game of repentance.

“And, hence, ends the nonsense.”

I’m pretty sure Aikawa had said the staff room was right below us,

so taking care to make as little noise as I possibly could, I headed for the same emergency stairs we had come up. Happily there didn't seem to be anyone around, and I quickly effected my escape from the faculty building. Let's see now, where am I—I had just been following Aikawa on the way there, so I had no clue where I was. I had no idea which way to go or what I would find when I went there, nor even which direction we had come from.

"…Well, whatever."

I decided to just start strolling…and with any luck, I hoped to run into Shiogi Hagihara. Seeing as Shiogi was, in the words of Aikawa, "like me." I didn't dislike—meeting people who were like me. Why, I don't know. Did I have some admirable notion that I could maybe become close with someone who was like myself, or that they would understand me?

Visibility was poor. There didn't seem to be any lighting installed—which made perfect sense, since a school is not primarily meant for nocturnal use. Seemingly Sumiyuri Academy—no, no need to keep calling it by such a classy name at this point—Hang 'Em High didn't appear to have a night school. Or maybe they just had no need to distinguish between day and night.

"Seriously though, there really isn't anyone around…"

Aikawa may've driven everybody off, but still, they didn't seem like folks who would give up so easily. And I had a hard time believing there was a curfew…besides which I doubted the "faculty" was going to stay on the sidelines forever.

At which point—I realized something.

When the hell had the person responsible for the murder of the Director, Noa Origami—leaving aside whether you could call someone who did something like that a "person"—perpetrated it? From what Aikawa and Hime-chan had said, it seemed as though the current state of emergency had been declared by the Director herself. Which meant that, if nothing else, she must've been killed after she gave that order. And the smell of the blood, the texture of the flesh, hadn't been all that old. At the very least it couldn't have

been more than a day.

And when it came to motive—those were "a dime a dozen." Noa Origami's hobby was being hated by people, being detested by people, being resented by people, being cursed by people… She sounded like quite a lady, by all accounts.

"Then is a struggle for power—a reasonable assumption?"

Pinning the crime on a fugitive and a couple of outsiders was an excellent gambit. And giving the students the opportunity to take revenge would boost their morale. If there was one thing we could turn to our advantage, I suppose it was the fact that the Director's murder didn't seem to have come to light as of yet.

Ahh. So that's why Aikawa is holed up in there. By the time I came to this belated realization, a school building I recognized had appeared before me. This was—yeah, it was the one containing "Year 2, Class A," where I'd first met up with Hime-chan. Though that seemed like ages ago now.

"Oh, right. The photo…"

At this point the map was irrelevant, but that reminded me that I'd dropped the photo of Hime-chan at some point while we were running around. Should I look for it? That might also be irrelevant, but—I couldn't think of anything else I particularly wanted to do. I could just barely recall the way to the main gate from where I was, but I was enough of a pessimist to assume there'd be some kind of trap set there. And my intention hadn't been to leave the school. I simply wanted to get the hell out of that room. That discomfiting room.

I'd said all kinds of things to Hime-chan…but the truth is probably just that it was oppressive to be in there with Aikawa. Just that old boring pride. Though pride is always boring.

"Hm…doesn't happen every day…that someone affects me this much."

Was Aikawa just special? No, I had a feeling it wasn't that. Only one

person was special to me□and that person wasn't present. Someone similar to that person, but not that person.

I went into the building, found the stairs, and went up them. The lights were off. It was dim, but I somehow felt like the visibility was better than it had been outside. Probably a question of concentration. Now then, where was "Year 2, Class A"? Seemed as though I'd be most likely to find the photo if I began the search there. Had someone already found it, perhaps?

As I searched for it, my thoughts returned to the locked room of the Director's office. There were two windows in addition to the door, but of course those had been locked as well. Double-locked, with no way to open them from the outside. And Aikawa had immediately checked every space where a person could conceivably hide…hm.

Which reminded me, there was something strange. Aikawa was right, the fact that it was a locked room was significant. It meant that we were being framed for the crime. In which case, there was one other thing… What about the fact that the Director had been "dismembered"? And was there some significance to the grotesque way the head was suspended from the ceiling?

It might not take all that long to dismember someone with a chainsaw…but why take the trouble? Had the corpse been dismembered because of some pent-up grudge, or had there been some necessity for doing so? There was no way it was as simple as It's called Hang 'Em High so I hung the head up high.

"'Dismemberment,' huh…" Dismemberment, dissection, biotechnology, ecology. "Kinda reminds me of the Prof."

Not that I had any desire to be reminded.

Just as I was beginning to lose myself in dark memories of my time as a student in the ER Program.

"Swayyy…"

A figure appeared before me.

"SWAYyy…"

Wait, that's not right. She was already there in front of me, so why would I describe her as a "figure"? I should obviously just say "person." And yet I couldn't get a clear fix on her, flickering there amid the gloom, ever so creepy and ever so mysterious.

Her figure was indistinct, almost like she existed in a different dimension, or like there was some kind of membrane between us.

"…Stup."

And she stopped moving.

Cropped hair and a black sailor uniform. Which was in tatters, as if she'd been beaten up by a gang of thugs, but that just seemed to be her style. And the arms poking out of its sleeves held

"Hey. Lemme introduce myself I'm Tamamo Saijo. A first-year."

Right hand: an Eliminator 00.

Left hand: a Griffon Hard Custom.

She Tamamo had these two oversized knives, which were too unrefined and too deadly for the hands of a girl, at the ready. She held them both in a reverse grip as she stood staring at me, rigid and motionless, almost as if that were her natural stance. A hazy, vacant presence, with vacant eyes.

Guess I got a little ahead of myself.

Definitely wasn't expecting the knives to come out. Can't believe things are getting this unusual this time around… That island full of geniuses and that serial slasher were both way more straightforward in comparison. Who the hell was going to come out of the woodwork next?

I mean, this girl was overloaded with laughable features, from her clothes to her equipment, but where to start?

"School let out hours ago, kiddo."

"That's all you've got?" she quibbled with my jibe.

At least it seemed we could establish some kind of communication; Tamamo narrowed her eyes at me and smiled. Then, muttering, “Swayyy…SWAYyy,” she shook her head as if to clear it. It seemed like she had a migraine or something, like she was struggling to bear up under the pain. Or maybe she just had low blood pressure. She did look kind of sleepy. Perhaps noticing my stare, Tamamo collected herself with an ah.

“Hmm? Oh, these knives are just for fun… No need to worry.”

“Okay, good…”

I had happened upon a liar.

“Let’s see…yes. I was looking for you guys…yes. Hold on, though, weren’t the three of you…supposed to be together? Can I just not see ’em? Weird. Glasses, glasses…”

“…”

What was wrong with her? I genuinely wanted to know, insofar as the answer to that question was directly linked to my own survival. She was, what, cool, or hip, or the kind of girl who seemed like she might even have wings sprouting out of her back.

“Ahhh. Let’s see…” she shook her head. “Well, whatever. I’ll worry about it after I’ve stabbed you a few times.”

“You’re making a mistake, Tamamo.”

Paying no mind to her elder’s kindly words of caution, Tamamo crossed the two knives in front of her petite chest.

“Snikt… Heheh.”

She grinned faintly, and her cheeks reddened. She seemed to be feeling bashful. But the combination of that awkward grin with the glint of her blades was the stuff of nightmares.

Wielding a knife in each hand□that in and of itself wasn’t threatening. It meant that her arm movements and attack patterns were quite limited, and it also impeded her defense. In kendo, too,

you wouldn't even attempt dual wielding unless you were a serious master. But on the flipside, if you were such a master—you could manage two weapons with ease.

In other words, everything was riding on one question—was she a novice or an expert? And at Hang 'Em High, there were no novices among the student body.

"Hold on a sec, kiddo—"

"You can forget about begging for your life, I don't want to hear it—umm, too much of a hassle." Tamamo tottered slowly closer. "And please don't call me 'kiddo' when we've only just met, it's demeaning… I'm going to slash you to ribbons."

Slash me—to ribbons.

Like the Director?

Like the Director was slashed to ribbons—by "Zigzag"?

"Hang on—I've got a question. Is this Shiogi's plan, did she send you?"

"Naaah… Shiogi-senpai did seem to be cooking something up…but I'm no good with that kind of thing, so I just came after you on my own."

Heh, dimples appeared on Tamamo's face. It was all well and good that she had such a cute smile, but I would've preferred she stick to her group's plan of action. Do they not teach cooperation at this academy? You've got to learn how to get along with other people, Tamamo, that's what school is all about.

"Ready or not, here comes Tamamo-o-o… SWAY…y…y!"

And she came flying at me, her movements a total one-eighty from her previous laxity, her interlacing knives directed at my throat.

Yikes, the girl genuinely, seriously meant business.

Of course I couldn't possibly take her on, so I spun around and fled

as fast as my legs would carry me.

“Hey…you can’t run away,” Tamamo mumbled, then gave chase, her knives still reverse-gripped in both hands. She was such a small girl that I’d figured I could lose her□but that was overly optimistic. I’m not slow, but Tamamo was too fast. It felt like being chased by Kuchisake-onna or Hijiko-san or some other urban legend. Dammit, had I only managed to escape with Hime-chan under my arm because our pursuers were too slow? In other words, had I gotten to a new level in the game? Tamamo, steadily closing the gap, suddenly hurled the Griffon at my head.

“Wh-Whoa!”

I narrowly managed to avoid it by flinging myself to the floor. This was no joke. Any way you slice it, that knife is not made for throwing, but she tossed it like it was a shuriken. Just how good was this chick?

Well, the very fact that she was wielding oversized knives with her skinny arms was abnormal to begin with. Did this school defy the laws of physics, too?

Then Tamamo plopped onto my back where I lay face down hugging the floor of the hallway, and held her remaining knife, the Eliminator, to my throat. All she had to do was draw it to the side, and that would be it for my carotid artery.

“What do you say in this situation again…checkmate? Nope, that won’t cut it. You don’t really seem like a king. How about…the brash knight is prey for the pawn?”

So I’m just a knight?

Another half-assed choice.

“Okay, now I’m going to ask you some questions…so please answer as truthfully as you can. Me, I don’t actually care, but the more truthful you are, the longer you live. That’s the deal,” said Tamamo in an incredibly listless voice. It felt like she was just going through the motions, as though not only conversation but life itself seemed

to wear her out.

“Let’s see… Swayyy. Where are…Overkill Red and Yukariki-senpai? The thing is, we’d really like to find them.”

“I’ve got a question first.”

“Whaaat. That’s not how this works. I’m the one asking the questions.” Tamamo puffed out her cheeks. “But okay. Just this once. Too much hassle to say no.”

She didn’t seem to be much of a conversationalist. Apparently she’d rather make things easy on herself and concede anytime a dispute seemed likely. Such pliancy wasn’t exactly something I admired in a young woman, but in this case it was most welcome.

“Are you ‘Zigzag’?”

“Whaa? What’re you talking about, no way.” Tamamo shook her head as if that was totally unthinkable. “This is just a stab in the dark, but I’m guessing you don’t really know what’s going on? Did you get pulled into this by the Red Dread without knowing anything about the situation here? You don’t even know about ‘Zigzag’… You didn’t do any research beforehand, or even□”

Apparently tiring partway through her sentence, Tamamo just stopped speaking.

Then, with a mumbled swayyy, she finished: “□ask someone?”

“Unfortunately, it’s my policy not to get too deep into things that seem like they might be bad news.”

“Okay. Then, let me ask you this… What’s your objective here?”

I’d been dead certain she was going to ask me about Hime-chan and Aikawa again, but instead I got this question out of left field.

“My objective… That’s□”

“It’s not to rescue Yukariki-senpai, is it? Nor is it to help out Overkill Red… Here’s the thing. Me, Hagihara-senpai, we all have a

reason to be here doing what we're doing."

"…"

"But you, do you have a comparable reason? Do you have a reason that can stand up to all of ours for being here, doing what we're doing? If so, please, enlighten me."

"Tamamo."

"Just rejecting it, saying it's abnormal or unrealistic or something, that's cowardly. You really shouldn't be so quick to judge," she said in an emotionless voice. "Or, are you so attached to your own value system and your own sense of what's normal?"

Well, if you ask me.

The academy is weird□but what gives me the right to judge it? Aren't I just as weird?

"Oh, whatever, this is too much hassle." Tamamo adjusted her grip on the knife so that she was holding it the right way around. "Time to die etcetera."

The blade began to abrade my skin□

"□!"

Death.

I was horribly calm. Horribly calm, and pretty disappointed. Despondent. Was I going to die here, just like that? I'd always figured someone would kill me in some gonzo grand guignol. To go out like this, like some bit player who gets squashed under a crumbling building□no.

Maybe this was the only appropriate end for me. For an insignificant worm like me. I had assumed my tedious little life would flash before my eyes, but that dream too faded like the mourning dew□

Tomo Kunagisa. Only Tomo Kunagisa remained in my thoughts.

Ah, how I wanted to see her again…

How I wanted her to know I was sorry.

“□”

At that moment, footsteps echoed down the hall.

The sound of footsteps trotting towards us.

“Master… Masterrr!”

Tamamo jerked around in surprise and looked in the direction this cry had come from.

“Yukariki, senp□”

And loosened her grip on the blade.

Without waiting to visually confirm that it was Hime-chan, I used the strength of my back and arm to flip Tamamo off me, then buried my left elbow in her solar plexus as I spun towards her. I didn’t have the breathing room to adjust for the fact that she was a girl, or that she was younger than me.

Tamamo crashed into the wall of the hallway□and lost consciousness. No, even when she’d been awake she’d seemed unconscious, so maybe that’s the wrong way to put it, but anyway, she stopped moving.

When I touched my neck□it was bleeding.

To be precise, a single layer of my epidermis had been cut.

“Masterrr!” This from behind. “I’m finally found youuu!”

“Hime-chan…” I turned around and finally laid eyes on her. “Why’re you here?”

“Sorry,” she said as she gasped for breath. “Hime-chan’s late because I just couldn’t open that door on my own. In the end I came through the ventilation shaft. There was an exhaust fan in the

ceiling, that you could take off from insides the room. Teeheehee, it would probably be impossible for you, Master, but Hime-chan's small, so I managed to get out that ways."

It wasn't to hear her tale of toil that I'd asked my question. So there was an exhaust fan in the ceiling? Did I not notice thanks to the overwhelming impact of a suspended head? How careless of me. But more importantly.

"What about Aikawa? Is she with you?"

"Nnnh," Hime-chan growled like an animal. "I woke Ms. Jun up after you left. She said, 'People can do whatever the fuck they want,' and refused to help. She wouldn't even open the door for me. I had no choice, so I come alone."

"Hime-chan, I come alone isn't…"

"You've wrong, Master," she declared patly.

Staring straight at me.

"Earlier you argued me down, but you were wrong. I can't stick around because I don't want to get in the way, that's just cowardice."

"Harsh. Though, I can't argue with it. Being a cowardly chicken is A-OK with me. Way better than ending up at some unforeseen outcome, anyway. Way healthier. I've said this a million times, but running away is the only thing I think about. From my enemies, and from my friends."

I guess it's ironic. That I of all people should want a clear vision of the future more than anything, after how hostile I'd been to that unpleasant fortune-teller.

"That's just proof that you have the leeway to think about 'the future'!" For some reason, and I really have no idea what that reason was, but for some reason Hime-chan really laid into me. "If you were really living each day like it was your last, you wouldn't have time to think about things like that! I'm going to come out and say it, Master: aren't you just slacking off?"

“Thanks for that, Hime-chan.”

I was aware. That my voice. Was getting shrill.

“What do you know about me? What do you know about someone who has no choice but to slack off?”

“If nothing else, I know that you’re a nonsense user who does nothing but make excuses. No matter what you say, Master, you’re just scared of being around Ms. Jun.” Here Hime-chan’s tone became especially confrontational. With a little nasty mockery thrown in. “It’s just that you feel uncomfortable, because being near a ‘massive’ presence like Ms. Jun makes you feel tiny.”

“Tha hold it. Nobody talks to me like that. I ”

She’d hit the nail right on the head, and I almost lunged at her. It was totally unlike me. I barely managed to restrain myself, and I do mean barely. If Hime-chan hadn’t reminded me of “her,” nothing and no one could’ve stopped me.

Not the unchanging, unending, unyielding Thin Blue Line Between Life and Death. Not the Seven Fools, they who were closest to solving the riddle of the world. Not that painter who scattered discrimination and disdain in her wake. Not the transcendent one who saw only that which could not be seen.

Nor even humanity’s strongest contractor.

“ What’s wrong with that?”

Being deemed useless.

My insignificance revealed.

And so being abandoned what was wrong with being afraid of that?

What was wrong with being afraid of betrayal?

“Trust is sad. Trust is really sad. Everyone is alone. So the more trusting you are, the greater the shock of betrayal. Trust breaks, it

crumbles, and it never goes back to the way it was.”

“But being alone is lonely.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that we’re alone. If you can’t live alone, you’d be better off dead. If you’re saying people group up out of loneliness, then the more people someone is able to trust, the lonelier he or she is. People who remain alone are sad, wretched, impoverished, ugly, piteous, isolated—and above all, noble.”

Like the girl who got strangled.

“Sullying that with the word ‘lonely’ is blasphemy.”

“Then you’re not lonely, Master?” asked Hime-chan. “You’re alone because you’re not lonely?”

“…”

“Hime-chan’s always been lonely.”

Ahh—come on.

Don’t look at me, not with those eyes.

Innocent. Pure. Simple. Generous. Affectionate. Honest.

Not now—not at me. Not how I am.

There’s no such thing as atonement, okay?

I want to run away. To run away. To run away.

To flee. To escape. To hightail it out of there. To scatter to the four winds.

Yeah, like that other time—

“How many times am I going to do this to myself.”

The strong dose of nonsense—gave me the urge to smile. When I don’t know a smile from a hole in the ground.

Yeah…that must be it.

Hime-chan doesn't resemble her.

She resembles her the way she was back then.

That's why I'm shaken up.

That's why I wanted to get out of the Director's office so badly.

"Nah…nonsense."

But. I guess I was still human enough not to retread that path, at least.

"Uh… Master?"

"Forget it. What I meant is that you got me there. Yeah, you're right, Hime-chan. This is no time for me to go being selfish, at any rate. My bad. You win… Is Aikawa still in the Director's office?"

"Oh, y-yes!"

Seeing me give in, Hime-chan's face lit up in the blink of an eye. Her smile radiated genuine happiness. A smile so vulnerable as to bewilder any who saw it. Dammit□my sense of guilt had gone bust ages ago, and I thought I'd gotten rid of it.

But if I had, then how come…

How come I couldn't just let go? If I actually knew to reject everything, how happy I'd be.

If I could just kill myself, that'd be best of all.

"Oh, but knowing Ms. Jun, she may've gotten angry and left without us…"

"Yeah…that's totally possible."

"But more importantly, what do we do about her?"

Hime-chan cautiously approached the unconscious Tamamo.

“Good question. She was a serious handful. Oh, I haven’t said thanks yet, have I? I was only able to find an opening because you came after me.”

“No poblano,” she said, feeling around Tamamo’s uniform. What was she doing? As long as it wasn’t some pervy hobby of hers. “A-ha. Here it is, I figured she’d be carrying a walkie-talkie.”

It resembled a cell phone…but with way fewer buttons. Apparently it was a simple wireless radio for intra-group contact. Easy to use, and it fits in the palm of your hand…but so what?

“So, before she was knocked out, Saijo may have radioed someone…maybe Hagihara.”

“That’s bad news…”

In other words, this was no longer a safe place? Though if we were trying to go down, the stairs weren’t safe either. We might bump right into them. Shit. We were more or less cornered… Maybe not fish in a barrel, but still, this was no barrel of monkeys.

“Hmmm.” Hime-chan seemed deep in thought; then at length she opened the pouch she had dangling from her shoulder and said, “Guess I’ve got no choice. Last resort time.”

“I’ve been wondering about that for a while. What’s in there?”

“All kinds of thing. They call it the Hang ’Em High Swiss Army Knife. Not that it’s actually a knife. Or Swiss.”

With a flourish, she produced a number of spindles from the pouch. A bit big for sewing, but definitely not fishing reels either. The line was wound around them as full as it would go. Or no…maybe it wasn’t line?

“What is that?”

“Line works. You might also call it wire or string.” Hime-chan kept on pulling more spindles out of the pouch. “Silver and titanium wires. Both chemically treated to maximize their tensile strength. This ones are various types of fiber. Kevlar, aramids, carbon, lots of

different kinds.”

Kevlar was the only one I’d heard of. Pretty sure it’s the material used in bulletproof vests. Line or not, nothing could hold a candle to it in terms of strength.

“It’s used all over the places, in space exploration, military production.” Hime-chan opened the window of the hallway, then opened the window of the classroom opposite, and began winding the various lines this way and that. While they were still on the spools they were visible, but only just. Unwound in individual filaments like that, the fibers were so thin that in the gloom of the hallway you couldn’t see them at all unless you squinted hard. They looked like cobwebs that could be severed by a touch. When I went to test this theory, though, Hime-chan stopped me. “Ah ah ah, no touching. If you’re not careful, you’ll get your finger cut off.”

Apparently I was the one who’d be severed.

“Hmmm…so this is piano wire, right? There really are all different kinds, huh… So, Hime-chan, what is all this? What’re you doing?”

“I’m making a rope. The window frame wouldn’t be able to supports both of us, so I’m doing some calculations to properly distributes our weight.”

“Hold on. You’re saying…” my words broke off for a moment. “You want us to rappel down?”

“You said what I’m saying, yes.”

“You’re kidding.”

“It’s fai-yai-yain!” Tripling the middle of the word like a rocker, Hime-chan puffed out her chest. “Master, please just give up and admit that you’ve been duped by Hime-chan!”

“That just means I’ve been duped…”

I said it once

“That just means I’ve been duped!”

I said it twice.

Some part of me couldn’t help thinking□

I wish I’d just run away.

Act Five

BACKSTAB REWIND

0

The question isn't whether or not you can trust someone.

It's whether or not they'll stab you in the back.

1

To make a long story short, I successfully rappelled to the ground with Hime-chan in my arms. I'd done it before when I was in the ER Program (wearing a hundred-pound backpack), and the rope she had improvised out of the various filaments was way sturdier than I'd imagined. It took some time, since I had to favor my dislocated shoulder, but the fact that no one got hurt, and that we weren't attacked in mid-climb, was enough to make it something of a success. Once we were safely on the ground, Hime-chan tried to wind the various filaments back onto their respective spools, but in this she seemed to fail; she'd been too diligent in fixing the rope in place.

"These wires really are useful in all kinds of ways. You can use them in places of a rope like this, or you can make traps out of them."

"Hmm…traps, right."

I'd certainly heard of illusionists and such using lines in similar ways. String users, or maybe you'd call them wire users. I'm no

assassin, but these could also be used as a weapon. Or was that a shamisen string? I don't really know much about it.

"Wire□or string, huh. Hey, Hime-chan."

"Exqueeze me?"

"Couldn't someone who was really good with these kinds of things create the locked-room scenario in the Director's office?"

Hmm? Hime-chan cocked her head. "Are you talking about the needle-and-thread trick?"

"Maybe a version of that. A locked room isn't actually physically airtight. There's got to be a seam somewhere. Someone could set the whole thing up even without entering, even if the door is locked, just by manipulating lines like these. The ventilation shaft you came through would work just as well. Either way, they could wind filaments like these around the Director's body while she's in there, then pull, and presto: the Director is sliced to bits…maybe?"

"That'd be impossible."

"How can we know without trying it?"

"I knows. You're optimistic about the wrong things, Master." Hime-chan finally gave up on retrieving her lines and came to stand beside me. "First off alls. How did Mr. Culprit suspend the Director's head from the ceiling? Wouldn't that be impossible without getting inside the room?"

"Oh, right…"

"And wouldn't you have to get inside the room at some point to wind the wire around her body in the first place?"

"Yeah…no, hang on a second. If there's a ventilation shaft, then it isn't a locked room at all. If the murderer got in and out that way…"

"They couldn't got in that way. I told you, didn't I? The fan was screwed into the ceiling, so no one could got in that way, and if

they got out that way, they couldn't return it to the way it was originally. Even if the Director had invited them inside, they couldn't lock up after themselves on the way out, regardsless of whether they used the window or the ventilation shaft or the door. Ms. Jun checked them all, anyway. Didn't you notice?"

"Uh-uh…"

I didn't notice.

So the ventilation shaft was out, huh? The hand-scanner on the door was unquestionably insurmountable (even Aikawa couldn't get it open without resorting to violence), which meant that the only possible point of breach was the window or that ventilation shaft.

"Plus, if someones was good with these wires they could definitely chop someone to bits, but the wounds would be a lots cleaner. They wouldn't be all ragged like those were."

Oh. True, the murder weapon was a chainsaw, wasn't it. If Aikawa thought so, anyway, I figured she was probably correct. Jun Aikawa, contractor. The number of dead bodies she'd seen had to be on a different order of magnitude from someone like myself.

"A chainsaw…hm. Wait. Hold on a sec, Hime-chan. I was more or less joking when I said it, but…could you? Dismember someone? With those wires, I mean…chop them up, shred them?"

"Uh huh. They're like a jigsaw. I tolds you, you'll get cut if you touch them? Basically the same principle. Tensile strength is a question of how quickly and how briefly you apply force, and to how small an area. Precisely because these filaments are so fine, they have the capacity to dismember a human body."

"Hunh. Like getting a paper cut?"

"When it's used as a weapon, they call it a wire saw or something. I learned abouts it in class. Monofilament swords, garrote wires, rigid cords. So-called concealed weapons, you know? Even a beginner can sever a finger if they follow the proper procedure, and a master can supposedly slice someone to bits with nothing more than a roll

of electrical tape."

"Seems like the kind of manga Aikawa would like. I hate to sound like Tamamo, but wouldn't it be quicker to just stab someone with a knife and get it over with instead of going to all that trouble?"

"Sure. But it has all kinds of practical applications that a knife doesn't. If you create a network of lines operating on the principle of the pulley, you can mounts a multilateral attack. Like a spider web, you know? Which is why the threads are called webs, and the people who use them are called weavers. This is a genuine, age-old combat technique. It's the reel deal."

Weavers, sure. Sounds totally normal.

"Nothing worthwhile has words like 'genuine' or 'quintessential' attached to it in this day and age. Damn…in the old days, people thought up some crazy stuff."

Maybe they had no other choice in an age when life-or-death combat was a daily occurrence, but still, turning string into a deadly weapon?

"Right? Almost no one learns that kind of sci-fi trickstery these days anyway. It's like something out of fantasy, and you definitely can't learn it overnight. It's like you said, Master, much quicker to just stab someone with a knife."

Which is why it's usually used for safety, like we just did, said Hime-chan, before doing that thing where she whipped her finger up and snapped it back down.

"Almost no one□means that there are still a few people who learn it?"

"Right. There's even one here at the academy□they calls her 'Zigzag the Spider.' Crazy, huh?"

"'Zigzag the Spider'…you say."

"Uh huh. She's a third-year named Yuma Shisei, not that anyone calls her by her real name anymore. She and Hagihara are the top

students here. Of course, the lines that ‘Zigzag’ uses aren’t like these. Hers are the genuine article.”

“Weavers and webs… Doesn’t make for a very realistic story, does it. Is it really gonna be okay to introduce that kind of thing into the narrative?”

“Seems more realistical to me than a master detective or a locked-room murder. At least this kind of thing has a historical basis.”

“What a dicey remark.”

“Call it a disclaimer.” Hime-chan began stowing the reels back in her pouch, complaining, “No-o-o, they’re all tangled ups.” But unrelated to this fuss, a flickering candle of unease had lit itself in my mind.

If this “Zigzag,” this Yuma Shisei—whose superiority even Shiogi Hagihara and Tamamo Saijo acknowledged—were to take the field against us, would I be able to protect this bumbling girl, who seemed inept at pretty much everything? This was not a hypothetical question. “Zigzag” seemed unavoidable if we were going to forge ahead in our attempt to get Hime-chan out of this academy.

We had to come to a decision about what to do. Rejoining Aikawa was probably our best bet—as long as we were with the world’s strongest, this “Zigzag” was nothing to fear—but we didn’t know whether or not Aikawa was still in the Director’s office. In which case, should the two of us attempt an escape on our own? While avoiding the watchful eye of the “tactics expert” Shiogi Hagihara?

“A thorny problem…”

In retrospect, however, that “problem” was a triviality not even worthy of the name.

Caught up in pondering the triviality—I completely missed Hime-chan’s expression as she spoke the name Yuma Shisei.

If I had properly taken stock of that expression, the look of someone speaking with pride about her own honored “teacher,” mixed with a

certain sense of resignation and a soupçon of contradiction and inconsistency, things might've been different. I might've been able to glean something of the relationship between Hime-chan and Yuma Shisei.

This was an absolutely irredeemable tactical error.

"Any way you slice it, seems like we're going to have a seriously tough time with this…'Zigzag.'"

"We are. To be honest, without Ms. Jun, our only option would be to runs away. 'Zigzag' always wears gloves, so you'll know her the moment you see her. Weavers always wear gloves, otherwise they'd cut their own fingers off."

"Gotcha. Something to recognize her by."

So, all we have to do is look out for someone wearing gloves?

"Oh, speaking of top students, that girl from before Tamamo Saijo, she's the number-one combat specialist among the Hang 'Em High first-years. They call her 'the Dark Knife,' she's a feared extremist."

"Sure didn't seem like it…"

"Don't judge a book by its cover. Tamamo is the great hope of the academy, not like Hime-chan. You just got incredibly lucky, Master."

"Lucky, eh?"

It had certainly been a close call. If Hime-chan hadn't shown up, and if I hadn't landed my subsequent counterattack…

But that had also probably earned me Tamamo's undying enmity. The very thought was enough to freeze my blood. To be honest, I was way more compatible with a tactician than I was with someone like her, where you never knew what they were thinking.

"Tamamo doesn't usually get sent on such insignificant missions. She probably got involved because of Ms. Jun… I expectorate Hagihara was behind it."

Advancing another level in the game.

“Even if we didn’t have to worry about ‘Zigzag,’ there’s no way Hime-chan and Master could contend with a strategy devised for Ms. Jun. As long as she’s still here, we should do our leavened best to join back up with her.”

A baking competition?

“I think you mean ‘our level best.’ Though I don’t think dividing our forces was such a bad strategy—nor is you being with me instead of her, Hime-chan; I doubt they’d expect it.”

“But the danger is too dangerous.”

“Yeah. We might as well give up on figuring it out on our own, and leave it to the professional…”

As I walked a little ways away from the school building, it occurred to me that out here we had a bit more breathing room than we did inside. We had a better view of our surroundings, and there were fewer places for someone to hide. Hime-chan seemed to take it for granted—and I had taken it for granted—but if Shiogi was indeed the one currently devising the anti-Jun Aikawa strategy, did she know that the Director was dead? Shiogi was a tactician, a staff officer. She was very much not a simple student, top or otherwise. So I was pretty sure she’d have to check in with the Director at regular intervals, even if she did so through the “staff room” rather than directly—in which case, it was very unlikely that she and the other students didn’t already know about Noa Origami’s murder.

And if they didn’t—then someone was concealing it. And if that was true, then the only conceivable candidate would be the “culprit.” Someone at this academy—was manipulating the picture for her own ends. If it was a struggle for power, then maybe it was someone from the “staff room”…or.

Or, if it was one of the students.

Who would be most qualified to do such a thing?

“Hime-chan. What kind of a girl is Shiogi?”

“Huh? Why do you ask? That’s a bolt from a clear blue moon.”

“I mean, I’m just interested. As Mencius says, ‘Know thyself and know thy enemy, and you shall meet no danger even in a hundred battles.’”

“That’s Sun Tzu.”

Corrected by Hime-chan.

“You’re surprisingly uneducated, Master.”

And the salt in the wound.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Ever heard of Fermat’s Last Theorem? I was the one who proved it!”

“Y-You was?! I had no idea, I can’t believe I was so rude! Sorry!”

“…”

Aaand she actually believed me.

“Anyway, I’d like a detailed report on Shiogi. Will you tell me whatever you know?”

“Let me see. Well, she’s very intense. Severe, is that the word? If she weren’t then I guess she might not be able to work as a tactician, but it still feels out of the ordinary. She’s like the Director that ways.”

“She’ll do anything to achieve her objectives?”

“No, Hagihara herself doesn’t have any objectives. She just adopts whatever strategy’s most effective to complete the task she’s been given. Hagihara doesn’t have any will of her own.”

“Interesting. I guess it’s not the place of the tactician to have her own objectives. If every piece on the shogi board had a will of its own, it’d be pretty hard to play.”

“In that sense, it’s less that Shiogi’s suited to being a tactician and

more that she isn't suited to being anything else."

Hmm. Like me, just as Aikawa said though, were we really alike? Shiogi and I were the same insofar as we had nothing inside ourselves. But it seemed like her options were even more limited than my own. Though that probably wasn't her own fault, it was because she was stuck in this academy.

That's the difference between people who belong to an organization and people who can't belong to one. At that point my interest in her was abruptly aroused. Including the suspicion that she'd murdered the Director.

"But just because she's a tactician doesn't mean you can let down your guard. Every student at this school acquires some skill at self-defense, including her."

"Yeah, I learned that the hard way."

"Kendo is Hagihara's specialty. She's second dan."

"Second dan? That seems pretty average for this place."

"No, in kendo, second dan is nothing to sneeze at. Since ancient times they've referred to it as Kendo Sun Vulcan, you know."

They definitely haven't.

Shiogi Hagihara Tamamo Saijo, and finally Yuma Shisei, huh? What a batshit-crazy motley crew of outstanding warrior-scholars. The road ahead was fraught with peril. If there was any saving grace, it was that the students who favored a direct assault, like the Dark Knife and Zigzag, tended to lack strategy.

"I gotta say. Shiogi, Tamamo they're pretty interesting girls. If only I hadn't met them in this insane place."

Shiogi in particular was my type.

"You're soft on your enemies, aren't you, Master. That's what they call skyping with the enemy."

“Somebody put me out of my misery,” I shook my head. “But no matter what you say, Shiogi, Tamamo, Yuma, they’re all human same as us.”

“They’re all human different from us.”

For once, Hime-chan sounded less than optimistic. With that gloomy expression of hers, naturally.

I looked her over again. This all started because Hime-chan wanted to quit this academy, because she wanted to run away from it—but there was no possible way they would go to all this trouble to stop her over something like a little “non-disclosure agreement.”

She’d called herself a washout, and I believed her, and Aikawa hadn’t contradicted her—but upon consideration, was it really possible that Ichihime Yukariki could be “a nobody washout” if she was friends with the world’s strongest?

This was total conjecture, but perhaps there was another reason why they were attempting so tenaciously to prevent her from escaping. For instance, maybe she had some kind of special abilities or mutant powers, which was why the Director didn’t want to let her go…

Maybe she was a “Dark Knife” like Tamamo Saijo, or a “Spider” like Yuma Shisei. But as far as I could tell from what I’d seen of her in battle thus far, she didn’t possess any direct combat skills whatsoever—if she did, she wouldn’t have been captured so easily by the tactician’s cordon. Then again, neither did she excel in strategy and tactics like Shiogi Hagihara. To put it bluntly, Hime-chan’s behavior, coming after me included, could be summed up by the words “rash and impulsive.”

It somehow didn’t add up. It was like trying to do a Rubik’s cube with seven colors. When a jigsaw puzzle has too many pieces, it makes it impossible to finish. Too much evidence, an overabundance of clues.

If Hime-chan did hold some significance for this thoroughly unrealistic school, then it wasn’t for her skill or intelligence—but

maybe for some other secret psychic art she possessed. Something that could indeed compare with the “Tactics Expert,” the “Dark Knife,” and with “Zigzag the Spider.”

“Hm.”

Well, how about we fail to rejoin Aikawa and end up in dire straits when our escape route is blocked by Shiogi Hagihara, or Yuma Shisei, or Tamamo Saijo—how about a grand finale where at the last possible second, Ichihime Yukariki saves us by unveiling the secret ability she’s been hiding this whole time?

“Hime-chan’s been an ESPer all along!”

“Wh-Whuuut?! Totally unexpected! We’re saved!”

“But I can’t fully control my power…oh no, Master!”

“What’s happening?! My right hand is Hannibal?! My shoelaces are radiating a green aura?!”

…

Fine, I’ll never be a novelist.

An introvert who doesn’t even have any imagination—is there any reason to go on living?

And now back to our regularly scheduled story. Ahem. At any rate, Aikawa was likely still hiding something from me. And probably Hime-chan was too. Which was fine, that’s to be expected. I live with all kinds of secrets myself, and I won’t tell them to anyone no matter what. Secrets are only secrets because we keep them secret. All we can ask is for secrets to stay secrets and lies to stay lies—I guess?

If possible, I wanted to remain an outsider till the end. That was the one wish I had no desire to abandon.

As we were crossing some kind of courtyard, I tripped over something. I was scared shitless that it was a trap, on account of what Hime-chan had been saying, but nothing happened.

Apparently I'd just tripped over a stray soccer ball or something that someone had forgotten to put away.

"Gimme a□"

As I went to pick up the ball, my thoughts caught up to my actions. Sumiyuri Academy□Hang 'Em High, by no means a normal school. Would there really be something as banal as a "stray soccer ball" lying around?

I looked down at the ball. It was Tamamo Saijo's severed head.

2

There amid the gloaming it lay: her head, with that choppy haircut, had been chopped off.

However twisted and insane I may be, there was no way I could stay calm. The hand I'd picked it up with reflexively let go, and I just stood there, unable to think. I was in utter consternation. Driven to complete distraction. I simply could not comprehend the situation. I stood there in a state of total misapprehension. I couldn't even reprehend myself for my reaction. It, which of course made me think of Noa Origami's severed head hanging from the ceiling of the Director's office, had no expression. Tamamo looked like she was asleep, except that from her neck down there was nothing□

"Look out!"

Hime-chan saved me. She hurled herself at my waist as hard as she could to knock me out of the way, and while ordinarily this would've had no effect, Hime-chan being only about half my size, at present there was nobody home, my spirit had left my body, and she easily knocked me to the ground in a repeat of her tackle a few hours earlier.

And a split second later. A crossbow bolt whizzed through the spot where I'd just been standing and pierced the ground with an audible thud.

I took in the situation in an instant, my body temperature below the freezing point. I rolled sideways, holding tight to Hime-chan who was still clutching me about the waist. I was aware of more shafts striking the ground behind me□zhk zhk zhk□as I rolled. If I kept rolling in a uniform motion like that, however, the attacker would be able to anticipate our path and get a bead on us□I needed to mount a counterattack.

Where had the first bolt come from—over there? Judging by their trajectories thus far, I could make a rough guess. Even if our unseen assailant was moving as he or she fired, I could do some anticipating of my own. As I rolled, I picked up a good-sized rock, and changed direction. I watched as the next crossbow bolt struck the ground a little farther off target than the previous ones, then got to my feet and hurled the rock at the point where I estimated the archer to be firing from. With this, the attack ceased.

At length—a single girl materialized out of the surrounding darkness. That long black hair and slender physique, which I couldn't help but be fascinated by—and that black sailor outfit.

"I guess this thing really isn't much good if you're not proficient with it…" Muttering this, she cast the crossbow aside. She must've run out of ammo with that last shot. "It is I, Shiogi Hagihara. So we meet again."

"—An unexpected pleasure."

I stood in the line of fire, placing myself between Shiogi and Hime-chan. Ambushed again? It seemed Tamamo's call had gone through after all. She'd seemed slow on the uptake, but maybe she'd been a good team player.

But what did it mean that a piece of that selfsame Tamamo was lying on the ground out here?

"I'm pleased to've taken you unawares, but I'd hoped for a more successful surprise attack. My stratagem doesn't seem to be going according to plan—and that rarely if ever happens. Who are you, really?"

That last question was directed at me, but—that was my line. What the hell is this place? Three short hours ago I'd come upon the dismembered body and suspended head of the Director, and now I was stumbling over the severed head of a teenage girl. And, in between those two events, my life had been imperiled multiple times.

A warzone.

The word that had occurred to me the first time I faced off against Shiogi floated through my mind once more. Tamamo had tried to kill me, so it's not like there was any love lost between the two of us, nor friendship, nor sympathy—but looking at her head, severed as if someone had simply said, Time's running out, so let's end this…

"Does it—mean something that this is here?"

"It's meaningless to wonder about what it means. I always select the best, most suitable strategy, that's all. Then again…" And here Shiogi shook her head in consternation, and it didn't seem like an act. Her head, which at present was still attached to her body. "Thanks to the appearance of Overkill Red, the majority of the students are quaking in their boots, and as a result they're useless to me—so the best, most suitable strategy was off the table. But the second best, perfectly adequate strategy seems to have worked, so all's well that ends well."

She was talking like it was a done deal.

It was checkmate, no question. The checkmate after the masterstroke. Not a single crossbow bolt had found its mark, but through that attack she'd confirmed that Jun Aikawa wasn't hiding nearby. Shiogi had probably only half intended to actually hit us in the first place—and if it was just me and Hime-chan, the tactics expert could easily take us with nothing but her bare hands.

"Hide-and-seek time is over—"

We were cornered…

There was nothing we could do…we were utterly defeated. We'd been unable to slip through Shiogi's iron cordon.

A battle of wits—but I felt okay about losing this way.

If this was how it ended, that wasn't so bad.

Keeping Hime-chan safe was always going to be beyond me. That was Jun Aikawa's role, after all. What a shame, Mr. Nonsense User.

“Now then.”

Well, I would at least try and do a good job of begging for my life.

That much at least was well within my capabilities.

I took a step forward, and so did Shiogi at which point Hime-chan inserted herself between us.

Spreading her arms wide, she formed a tiny wall in front of me. It was a truly tiny, fragile wall but I understood full well what she intended by it.

“Uh, uh uh uh ”

Hime-chan was shaking like a leaf, but she didn’t move from that spot. She stayed, to protect me.

“…”

Seeing this, Shiogi stopped. Then she let out an exasperated sigh and said, “Please give up this pointless resistance, Yukariki. I don’t recall teaching you to fight losing battles. Even you can comprehend that right now, here in this place, you have no hope of staying my hand, can’t you?”

“I,” Hime-chan answered Shiogi in a quivering but resolute voice, “won’t know unless I try.”

“The idea that you wouldn’t know that unless you try it is pretty foolish.”

“Uh huh. And, that’s fine,” Hime-chan said. “Better to be stupid like me than clever like you.”

Ah.

I’d.

Been such an idiot.

Ichihime Yukariki was friends with Jun Aikawa.

But why would that mean she had to have special abilities, or mutant powers?

Why would she need that kind of qualification?

She had wept out of concern for me.

She had frantically restrained me.

She had come after me.

She had saved my life.

And she had smiled at me.

She was no washout.

Hime-chan.

You're a magnificent human being.

Fit to stand shoulder to shoulder with the world's strongest.

"Goddammit what a riot."

In which case, fine.

I'll keep on pretending we're friends a little longer.

I feel good, really good. Really, really good.

Right now I feel incredibly good.

So good that if I let my mask slip, I might laugh out loud.

"Hime-chan…you can get back on your own, right?" I whispered. "You followed me on your own, so you can get back to that room on your own, right?"

"Master? Whats are you saying?"

She looked genuinely confused.

Guess I was going to have to spell it out.

“I’m saying—get out of here and leave this to me.”

If ever there was a time to divide our forces, it was now. This was not selfishness or cowardice on my part—it was strategy. You don’t mind, do you, Shiogi? If as a tactician you’re okay with that happening to Tamamo—then I’ll also shed the role of the nonsense user.

From here on out it’s not a battle of wits.

It’s a fight to the death.

I’ll kill you, tear you apart, line you up, put you back together—and hang you out to dry.

“But, Master…”

“And one belated correction. Even if I couldn’t ever become friends with Aikawa, some small part of me wishes I could. I realized that just now. So your name for me is horribly on point… It’s definitely, definitively appropriate for a vague, half-assed person like myself, in all its ironic glory. And that being the case—” I glanced down at Hime-chan for a brief moment, but couldn’t see her expression. “Don’t you think it’s a little funny for a disciple to be ignoring her master’s wishes?”

Hime-chan—Ichihime Yukariki—nodded, and the moment she’d come to this decision, she took off running.

“Wait!”

During the instant when this surprise was registering on Shiogi’s face, I charged. Strike first and you need only strike once—it was nothing so strategically minded. I was just trying to buy enough time for Hime-chan to get away. However much of a “tactician” Shiogi Hagihara might be—she would still have no choice but to react to impending danger. It’s an uncontrollable innate reflex of the human animal. To get around it, you’d have to possess motor functions quicker than your reflexes, like Mr. No Longer Human—but unfortunately, Shiogi was, physically, a normal human

girl.

“□hk!”

She avoided my attack by a hair’s breadth, and in so doing retreated three steps, putting some extra distance between us. We now stood at what they call “the nine-step gap” in kendo. Plenty close enough for hostility, but a little far to actually fight each other.

Shiogi watched reluctantly as Hime-chan faded into the surrounding darkness, then let out a sigh. “I really don’t understand it… How do you keep throwing off my calculations? I can’t anticipate your actions at all. You’re like a living quantum uncertainty principle. It’s almost as if you have no objective of your own, and you’re just tormenting me for fun.”

Objective? Oh yeah…hadn’t Tamamo asked me about that as well? Though now I could give a very definite answer to that question.

“My objective is to help Hime-chan get the hell out of this place. Or let me gussy that up a little: think of it as an early graduation ceremony.”

“That attitude suits you much better. Than tossing around your usual frivolous nonsense.”

Shiogi seemed positively smug, despite the fact that she’d let Hime-chan (her “objective”) slip through her fingers. Despite the fact that her strategy had been twisted into scrap. This was a somewhat different Shiogi than the one I’d encountered five hours earlier.

“I suppose I should expect no less from Overkill Red’s partner.”

“Partner? Whoa there. I’m just a decoy who got roped into this by circumstances beyond my control. I wonder if she could ever even have a partner… That would require someone to be her equal, and who could ever be the equal of the world’s strongest?”

“The equal of the world’s strongest is the world’s weakest. And decoy? Come on, did they just finalize the Nonsense Reversion Treaty or something? No one’s going to believe that someone with the rare talent to infiltrate Hang ’Em High so easily and make

contact with Ichihime Yukariki□that someone like you, who was able to create an opening in the impregnable defenses of Hang 'Em High for the Red Dread to slip in, is a mere decoy."

"…"

Is that why□Aikawa used me for this job? Was her plan always to get herself inside, to send me in as the advance guard? That would add up. But that's all it would do.

"You're giving me too much credit. I toldja, didn't I? It was all just dumb luck."

"That would certainly give me peace of mind, but…since you don't seem to have realized it on your own, let me explain it to you as a parting gift on your journey to hell."

"A parting gift on my journey to hell? Nice turn of phrase, I like that. Personally, I love hell."

"…That talent of yours is extremely dangerous. The world around you just goes crazy without you ever having to lift a finger… Or maybe I should I call it 'whatever will be, will be bad'□nature taking its worst possible course? Ringing any bells? Abnormal situations always breaking out around you, bizarre characters always gravitating to you?"

"Rings a bell, yeah."

In fact, it rings the whole carillon. I'd take that to heart, if I thought I had one of those.

"You're an accident-prone superior deviant magnet, to stick to everyday language. Or to put it more simply, a troublemaker… In this case, the fact that you have no objective and no intentionality is a huge nuisance."

For a tactician like myself, she continued.

"Which is why for the sake of brevity, we refer to annoyingly irreducible equations like you as 'non-actors.'"

A non-factoring system, a formula for non-entity—an absolute equation whose very existence is more of an infraction than any null set or a conscious one like Hitoshiki.

“Totally. You and I may be similar, but insofar as you’ve been given an objective, and I refuse to accept even the objective I’ve been given, turns out we’re completely different after all. If you’re a tactician—I guess I’d have to be a charlatan.”

“Is that so?” Shiogi closed her eyes and nodded. “Well then, we cancel each other out. Violently.”

The prefatory remarks were concluded, and Shiogi slid forward one step, then another. I waited for her without taking any stance. She seemed a little wary of this, but that didn’t stop her from continuing her advance until she’d closed the distance to what they call “the one-step-one-sword gap” in kendo, and then—

“Time out.”

I called time out.

At which Shiogi’s shoulders slumped.

“Y-You—”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I never said I wanted to be your enemy.”

“What, do you mean?” asked Shiogi, cautiously retreating from me once more. “What other option is there under the circumstances?”

“Betrayal,” I responded shamelessly, not displaying an ounce of fear or trepidation, acting just as she’d done when she announced to Aikawa that she was going to run away.

“Be…trayal?”

“Yup. Upon consideration, it wouldn’t make for much of a match between us, you being a second dan in kendo and all. Doesn’t seem like I’d be able to get away if I ran, either…which just leaves ‘betrayal,’ right?”

Silver tongue□golden voice.

“When you say ‘betrayal’…what exactly are you proposing?”

“I’ll tell you where Hime-chan just ran off to, the same place where Jun Aikawa is hiding.”

“Immorality, huh? Even if I don’t enter into that bargain,” Shiogi looked me over with that appraising look of hers, “I can just break a bone or two and force you to tell me anyway.”

“That’s not gonna work, Shiogi. Not even the itty-bittiest chance. Because I swear to you right now that if you do that to me I’m just going to lie. And I’ll tell you upfront, I’m one hell of a liar.”

“I’m pretty confident I can make you tell the truth.”

“But there’s still that flicker of doubt, isn’t there. To put it your way, I’m Jun Aikawa’s equal, right? Not to mention, my ‘betrayal’ here means a lot more than just acquiring some info. As a tactician, I’m sure you understand. Funnily enough, it’s something you said yourself… ‘Overkill Red is soft on her friends.’ It’s true, Aikawa didn’t go after you earlier, did she? And being soft on your friends means being weak against your friends□or am I wrong?”

“Suppose I injured you,” Shiogi said as if she were just confirming something, “Jun Aikawa would vent her rage on me. If you’d ‘betrayed’ her, however□”

Trust is sad. Which is precisely why betrayal is painful.

“It would create an opening a tactician like yourself could exploit.”

“And…what do you get out of this bargain other than ‘avoiding immediate injury’?”

“Honestly I don’t give a shit. I mean, up until a minute ago I really did intend to take you on so that Hime-chan could get away□as a special treat to myself. But upon reflection, it’s not like I really have anything against you. I mean, an inhuman person who doesn’t think of people as people□now that’s my type.”

“…!”

Shiogi seemed startled at my words, and took a step back. This was a little unexpected, since I’d been sure she’d have a logical counterargument, but not being one to miss an opening just because I wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, I pressed on.

“I may be a non-important non-actor, but you’re not so different yourself, you’re not acting for your own sake either. Neither of us chooses our own objectives. There are differences, sure, but there are also similarities. We’re birds of a feather. Listen, Shiogi. I love virtuous, unselfish, noble types—and I have no desire to be enemies with someone who’s caught my fancy… In fact, I’d like to be on the best terms possible.”

“Are you saying,” Shiogi paused for the span of one breath in uncharacteristic bewilderment, before continuing, “that you’ve conceived a personal love for me, Shiogi Hagihara?”

“…”

Not quite, which is to say not at all…but whatever. It was probably just her strategic style as a tactician anyway. In which case I might as well take my own style and run with it. No, not just run with it. Run her through with it.

“You’re free to interpret that however you want. And naturally, this ‘betrayal’…or what did you call it, ‘bargain’? Doesn’t matter. Either way, this is a battle between tactician and charlatan, a continuation of a showdown where we’re not putting anything in writing. For all you know this is all just part of my charlatanry. If you’re not confident you can beat that with your ‘tactics’—then you don’t have to go along with it. Go ahead and break an arm, a leg, whatever you like. I won’t put up a fight.”

“…”

For a while, Shiogi pretended to agonize over it—this time her performance was totally transparent, which was uncharacteristic indeed. Then for another while, she stared at me long and hard. Finally she said, “Okay—if you think you can deceive me, Mr.

Charlatan, go ahead and deceive me to your heart's content," and proffered her left hand.

"You don't have to tell me twice. Deceiving and being deceived are both specialties of mine. Especially with girls who're my type." I put out my right hand.

"…" "Heehee."

Shiogi Hagihara laughed, almost the way a high school girl her age might laugh.

Act Six

END OF THE LINE

ICHIHIME YUKARIKI
The Client

0

The liar is the end of humanity.

1

And so it transpired that I betrayed Aikawa and Hime-chan—but what was actually going on? I mean, obviously, for my part, it was a stratagem to get myself out of that situation without the need for violence, but "now"—by which I mean now that I was traipsing through a totally unfamiliar school building with Shiogi, nominally guiding her to Aikawa's hiding place—things had reached a truly half-cocked state.

By which I mean that at the present moment, I could go either way. I could continue leading Shiogi on a wild goose chase, or I could lead her to the Director's office, where Hime-chan was heading, and where abideth Aikawa. If I wanted to betray them, I could betray them, and if I wanted to stand by them, I could stand by them. I was faced with the ultimate binary choice.

Though that said—

"Will it turn out the same, no matter which I choose?"

"Did you say something?"

"No, I didn't say anything."

“More importantly, are you sure they’re in this building? It seemed like Yukariki ran off in a completely different direction.”

“That was a ruse. Hime-chan knew I was about to screw her over.”

“Hmm…I see.”

The fact that I was waffling so much even though it was all too clear what lay ahead had to do with Shiogi. I’d succeeded at rounding off her sharper edges and inveigling her to join me, but since then her attitude had been oddly formal. We were strangers, so maybe that was only natural, but nevertheless, something about it felt unnatural.

Then there was the question of Tamamo. Tamamo, killed so ruthlessly then used as a tool. And at present I was walking along beside the person who had so used her. It wasn’t like I’d been about to fall for Tamamo or anything, but still.

And the murder of the Director could I assume Shiogi was indeed the culprit? At the moment, at least, I had my doubts. Noa Origami who, like Tamamo no, far more horribly than Tamamo, had been dismembered, her head suspended from the ceiling. If that had been the tactician’s mutiny, then was Shiogi Hagihara, walking here beside me, playing me for a fool? Did she, as a tactician, in fact know everything only to keep silent about it?

I just couldn’t be sure.

Phew. I was tired of thinking. It was too much of a pain in the ass, maybe I should actually go ahead and become a traitor? Shiogi and I seemed on track to becoming friends, and battling Aikawa seemed like it could be interesting. Ally or enemy, with Aikawa it seemed more or less the same either way. And Shiogi’s hair was really pretty. I wonder if she’d be mad if I touched it.

“What are you staring at? It’s impolite.”

Shiogi had stopped walking and was looking back at me dubiously. She seemed to have picked up on my bloodlust (if that’s what it was). I didn’t want to ruin her impression of me at this point.

Beginnings are the crux of any relationship.

“Nothing, sorry. Nothing at all.”

“Really?”

“Really. That is, Shiogi…”

I almost said, Your hair is really pretty, but stopped myself just in time. This was Shiogi we were talking about, she probably got that kind of compliment so often that she was sick to death of hearing it by now. In which case there was a good chance she would ignore me, plus there was the danger that she’d decide I was a total waste of space. In which case I needed to come at it from a different angle.

“Yes?”

“Your breasts are really big.”

All of a sudden Shiogi was flat on her back with her legs up in the air, like in a cartoon.

It was the first time I’d ever seen someone do that in real life.

When she got back up, her entire face was bright red and she was staring daggers at me. She kept opening and closing her mouth but couldn’t get anything out, and in the end she gave up and strode off quickly down the hall, her pretty hair streaming behind her. Hm, I’d blown it (but at least I’d tried).

Oh well. Giving up is the crux of any relationship.

“That reminds me,” Shiogi said after she’d proceeded in silence for a while, “I still don’t know your name. It’s inconvenient not to have something to call you, so if you wouldn’t mind, I’d appreciate it if you’d tell it to me.”

“Ah. The thing is, until now I’ve only told my real name to□”

I.

Began to answer, glancing casually out the hallway window as I did so. At present we were on the second floor, so we weren't all that high up—which is exactly why. Exactly why I was able to catch sight of Ichihime Yukariki walking unsteadily through the garden between the buildings.

"…"

What was she doing there? Even if the faculty building wasn't close by and took a while to reach…why should she be skulking around here, way off target? I only caught a glimpse of her before she slipped into the shadow of the trees and was out of sight—but there was no mistaking who it was.

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, um…um."

She couldn't have come back out of concern for me again, could she? Only to find that we were no longer in the courtyard—was she trying to find out where Shiogi and I had gone?

What—a pain in the ass. What a fucking busybody. Even if Shiogi was right that I was a magnet for weirdoes, freaks, and crazies, no one could be that worried about someone who was basically a stranger. I specifically told her to leave this to me. How similar did she have to be to "her" before she'd be satisfied, fer chrissakes… I started to get kind of pissed off.

"I, uh, just wanted to know your name."

"Right. My name…my name, my name…"

Shiogi hadn't noticed Hime-chan yet. When she did, she'd be liable to leap right out the window. She had no real reason to face Jun Aikawa. Hime-chan hadn't noticed us, either. If she had, she wouldn't be dilly-dallying down there.

In which case…in which case it was time to carry on with the charlatanry.

"Okay, let's make it a guessing game." I turned to face Shiogi such

that my body was blocking the window. “I’ll give you some hints, and you try to figure out my name.”

“Ooh. Sounds fun. I love games like that.”

Of course I didn’t tell her that I hate them.

“How many hints do I get?”

“Three. You can ask me three questions. No restrictions, except you can’t ask me my name or anything like that.”

“Hmmm. Okay, challenge accepted.”

Whereupon Shiogi lapsed into thought.

Lapsed into thought and forgot all about Hime-chan.

“Okay, QUESTION ①. Tell me all your nicknames.”

“Nicknames?”

“Yukariki called you ‘Master,’ and Overkill Red called you ‘Iitan,’ right? That kind of thing.”

“Gotcha. Up till now I’ve been called ‘Master’ and ‘Iitan,’ as you know, plus ‘Ikkun,’ ‘The Big I,’ ‘Ii-Bro,’ ‘Iino,’ ‘Inosuke,’ ‘Nonsense User,’ and ‘Charlatan.’”

“Those are all such lame terms of endearment… So the ‘I’ is the key, huh?”

“Is that one of your questions?”

“No, just thinking out loud. But why does Yukariki call you ‘Master’?”

“Good question…I’d love to know the answer myself. Because she’s the nonsense user’s disciple, I guess?”

“Huh… Anyway, next question. When you write your name in roman letters, how many vowels and consonants are there, respectively?”

Wow. It may have only been a diversion to distract Shiogi's attention from Hime-chan, but I was kind of impressed. She really made her questions count, as befits a tactician. It was a cunning way to get around asking me point-blank how many characters there were in my name.

"Eight vowels, and seven consonants."

"Hm. Interesting. On to my final question. If you convert the kana in your name into numbers, with 'a' being '1,' 'i' being '2,' 'u' being '3'…and 'n' being '46,' what's the sum?"

Checkmate. Man, her wheels turn fast.

"134."

"That's a pretty strange name you've got," Shiogi giggled.

"Who knows, maybe it's an alias. Since I pride myself on the fact that I've only ever told my real name to one other person."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. And while your guess is probably correct, you'd better not call me by that name. Only three people ever have, and none of them are still alive."

"Only…three?"

"One was Harukana Ii. My little sister. She died in a head-on collision between two airplanes. One was Tomo Kunagisa. My friend. She's alive but not alive, dead but not dead. And one was Magokoro Omokage. She…well, what would you call it. Her whole body was a playground for human experimentation, at the end of which she burned to death in a roaring conflagration."

"Because she called you by your name?"

"That's how I see it."

"In that case, what shall I call you?"

“Whatever strikes your fancy…”

As I said this, I glanced out the window. Good, Hime-chan was gone. I didn’t even see any indication that she was hiding somewhere. She’d seemingly managed to get away safely.

What was I doing? I was in limbo: I’d helped Hime-chan get away “for now,” despite not even being able to decide whether I was going to betray her and Aikawa or stick by them, but now what the hell was I going to do? It was a real conundrum. And I was blabbing to Shiogi about all this personal stuff.

Dredging up three unpleasant memories at once. Things I’d worked so hard to forget.

No.

Who was I kidding? I hadn’t forgotten them.

I didn’t need to dredge them up, they were always on my mind.

“Oh, right. Excuse me for a moment.”

From her breast pocket, Shiogi produced the same kind of cell phone-looking walkie-talkie thing Tamamo had been carrying and used it to contact someone.

“Uh huh□yes. Currently enacting the next phase of the strategy□I’ve acquired a ‘collaborator.’ Yes, please leave it to me, current location is…”

A status report? The bidirectionality of information transmission is important, so of course that would be necessary. If soldiers on the battlefield were left to their own devices to go every which way they pleased, the war would never get off the ground.

But with the Director dead, who could she be talking to? A member of the faculty? Or the infamous “Zigzag”□

“Roger that, Director. Signing off,” Shiogi said as she ended transmission.

I naturally didn't let my shock show on my face. But internally I was a maelstrom of confusion. Why do you have to give me even more to think about? What you just said, who the hell were you addressing?

Did this mean that someone else was calling herself the Director or no, that conversation just now could've been an act Shiogi put on for my benefit, but why would she need to do that?

In which case Shiogi couldn't be the culprit since she didn't know that the Director was dead. Come to think of it, I'd decided she was behind it based on essentially nothing. There was no real evidence, I'd just thought it might be her since Tamamo's head had been chopped off, same as the Director's. But now that I really thought about it

"Shiogi. It's my turn to ask a question… Did you kill Tamamo Saijo?"

"Huh?" She looked truly taken aback. "Why would I, Shiogi Hagihara, need to kill my own comrade?"

"I mean…with her head in the courtyard like that…"

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't possess that kind of technique. Only 'Zigzag' could pull it off."

A-ha. Speaking of, the wounds on the Director's and Tamamo's necks had been different. The Director's had been horribly rough while the plane of Tamamo's neck where the head had been severed was incredibly smooth. Was this what Hime-chan was talking about "Zigzag," the weaver? A lunatic who could use those filaments, which for me amounted to nothing more than a rope for rappelling, as a tool of murder

"It's absurd to imagine that I'd kill my comrade. I used a head I found lying in the courtyard as part of my subsequent stratagem, that's all."

"…"

Not sure what to think about that, either. Maybe that's just how it is

with “tacticians,” but Shiogi did seem to be lacking some element of human compassion. That may well be attributable to the influence of Hang ’Em High, but it seemed to me there also had to be some deeper issue with Shiogi herself.

But precisely because she was that kind of tactician—it was undeniably true that she’d never pointlessly kill her comrade and decrease the number of “pawns” at her disposal. Just as a shogi player would never ignore her knights, even if they aren’t particularly useful.

In other words, “Zigzag” was the antithesis of a tactician, closer to Tamamo than Shiogi—a berserker?

What did that mean? For the locked-room question. And the dismemberment question. Judging from the wounds, the Director’s murder was not the work of “Zigzag.” The culprit was someone else. I’d suspected Shiogi—but if she hadn’t killed Tamamo, then my basis for that suspicion was pretty thin. And there was no reason to suspect Tamamo of the Director’s murder, since she’d been killed now too.

So was the culprit a member of the “faculty” after all? Speaking of which, it was seriously suspicious that none of them had poked their noses out yet. If one of them was pretending to be the Director and still manipulating Shiogi and her crew—if Shiogi the Tactician of all people was being manipulated like a marionette, her head suspended from a string…

Embroiling me, and Shiogi, and Hime-chan and Tamamo, and even Jun Aikawa…

In something as stupid as a power struggle within the school? A proxy war? Something with not even a glimmer of hope for success. Not in the culprit’s wildest dreams—and. Did she really think she was going to get away with it?

Maybe it was time—to take this puppet master down a notch.

“Are you all right? You got so quiet all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s a hobby of mine to get quiet all of a sudden. By the way, Shiogi, mind if we play another game? Do you read detective novels at all?”

“Why would I?” Shiogi cocked her head in confusion.

“I mean…to pass the time, or to study, or…”

“Using books to study, hah… Katai Tayama says, ‘We can derive much greater inspiration from living people than we can from books.’”

“It’s cool that you aren’t even quoting from Throw Out Your Books, but you actually read Tayama?”

“Sure. Doesn’t every high school student?”

Apparently.

“Okay then, Quiz Time. How about this scenario…”

Without letting on that it had actually happened (and of course not telling her that Hime-chan and I were involved), I told Shiogi all about the locked-room murder and the Director’s dismemberment. About the strictly controlled iron door, the corpse within, the body parts, the suspended head. Top floor, double locks on the windows. The one-way ventilation shaft.

“That one’s pretty simple,” said Shiogi. “Doesn’t make for much of a quiz.”

“Simple, eh?” Of course, I’d posed this question to Shiogi not only to get her opinion, but also to see if she had any kind of reaction to it, on the off chance that she was in fact the culprit. But as far as I could tell, she wasn’t flustered. She just wore the disappointed expression of someone who was hoping for a challenge. “Okay then, let’s hear the solution.”

“The door was never locked in the first place,” answered Shiogi, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. “From what you said, they assumed that the door was locked from the start, but no one ever actually tried it out, right? They just assumed it was a

locked room when in fact it wasn't."

Someone had said something like that earlier, hadn't they? When you decide that it's a locked room, there are two possibilities. Either it is a locked room, or it isn't. Interesting—just because something appears to be a locked room doesn't mean it necessarily is. What a hackneyed trick.

When you try to cover up a lie with another lie, the first lie is instead laid bare. In which case starting with a single massive lie obviates the need for any follow-ups—was that it? If the door was "just closed" all along and not locked, then literally anyone could have killed the Director. Which would mean we'd jumped the gun in determining that it was a locked room—

"No, that's wrong."

If it were just me and Hime-chan who'd discovered the body, I'd have no problem accepting Shiogi's solution as the correct one. But there was someone else: Jun Aikawa. No way she could've made such an elementary mistake.

"Really? Then—yeah. That room wasn't necessarily the scene of the crime. After dismembering the body, the culprit tossed the pieces in from the next room through some opening—through the ventilation shaft, maybe. Through it, for instance, she'd be able to tie the severed head to the lights without ever entering the room."

"But the ventilation shaft can only be opened from inside the room."

"Which is why it's just a for instance. Even if it wasn't the ventilation shaft, the culprit surely would've been able to find some passage, some opening that a chopped-up corpse could fit through. A garbage chute, or a drainage pipe or something."

"I dunno…"

"Or they just had a master key."

That, too, was a solution that didn't require any courage, or hope, or dreams…but maybe it's crazy to look for such things in a

person's demise.

It felt like a total dead end. I needed a helping hand. I wondered idly how Hime-chan would mangle that expression.

"Hm?" Something. Was on the tip of my brain. "Well, forget the quiz. Sorry it was so lame. But seriously, this is one weird school, huh…"

"Is it? I really like it."

"You don't think about what it might be like if you'd had a normal life?"

"What other life would let me put my skills as a tactician to such good use?" smiled Shiogi, undaunted. "Same as there aren't many places where your 'non-action' would come in handy which reminds me. I wanted to ask, did you go to a normal high school?"

"Nope. I didn't even finish my compulsory education. After that…" She probably knew about ER3, but maybe it was best not to mention it. "I got my GED, and now I'm a freshman at Rokumeikan University."

"Is that the truth?"

"I'm not lying to you. I'm just not telling you everything."

"When you're trying to deceive someone, doesn't that amount to the same thing?"

This was a conversation fit for a tactician and a charlatan, regardless of time or place or circumstance. Lying, deceiving, dissembling, misrepresenting, bullshitting, falsifying, prevaricating. Dammit, it was like we weren't even having the same conversation.

"Do you have dreams for the future, Shiogi?"

"Dreams, no. The future holds only reality for me. So if I can manage to keep on like this until I 'graduate,' I think I'll probably get a job with Rule."

“Get a job, sure… Who do you think you’re kidding? Where does that lead, to becoming Zhuge Liang? Or Hannibal? I gotta say, I think a girl’s happiness lies elsewhere.”

“Whoa. That’s a horribly outdated opinion. What, are you telling me to become a housewife?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying it’s clear that if you go somewhere like that, you’ll end up unhappy. Which is your prerogative… Ultimately you’re the only one who’ll ever know what happiness means for you—but more importantly.” As we went up the stairs to the top floor and walked the halls, I asked Shiogi another question, stalling pointlessly. Though that said, it was something I really did want to ask her, something that interested me. “If I really am leading you to where Aikawa is right now, what do you intend to do? I don’t believe for a second that a tactician like yourself would challenge humanity’s strongest without some kind of plan, but I also don’t think there’s any trick you can pull against a one-woman Dirty Dozen like her.”

Relying on some kind of material superiority won’t work against Aikawa. And you certainly can’t get to her with underhandedness or unfairness. Even this charlatan can’t come up with a single way of hurting her. As I said to Shiogi, Aikawa might have the good grace to be a little shocked if she found out I’d “betrayed” her, but she’d quickly transform it into positive energy. That’s how mighty she is.

“Trick, no—stratagem, yes,” said Shiogi, nonetheless brimming with confidence. “Overkill Red may be the world’s strongest contractor, but that doesn’t make her the world’s strongest person—and that’s what I’m going to exploit.”

“Hmm.”

“My opponent may be the world’s strongest, but my name is Shiogi Hagihara. The Devil himself has to take a number to see me. I don’t play fair, so watch as I make a surprise attack from plain sight.”

What did that mean, was she planning to outwit Aikawa? Was she looking for a back door? That woman doesn’t have any doors at all, let alone a weak point or any inconsistencies, so it seemed like a

pretty tall order

And that's when I realized. Of course. That locked room. My thoughts returned to it. That's right, no matter how I mean it, no matter how meticulously the culprit set up that locked-room scenario, the opposing force was Jun Aikawa. Jun Aikawa has no weak points, no inconsistencies and for her, nothing is impossible or incredible. Only illogical. Faced with some outdated locked-room mystery, Jun Aikawa's your woman. Whether the truth turns out to be that "the door wasn't actually locked" or something else, it doesn't make a difference. Nothing gets by Jun Aikawa.

And yet, Aikawa had yet to unravel anything.

"How…"

How can that be? Isn't that the most illogical thing of all? For humanity's strongest to stumble at such a low hurdle has to mean that someone's cheating. A master detective who can't solve the case, a serial killer who doesn't kill people, a nonsense user who acts on behalf of strangers the whole thing was positively overflowing with contradictions.

And if so no, precisely because it's so. Shouldn't that dismembered corpse yield an obvious answer? The body of Noa Origami, chopped up with a chainsaw zigzagged.

Reconstruction…approximate expression…adaptation…and finally compilation.

Then, my thoughts arrived at something even more important. At a deception so overpowering that something on the order of a locked room vanished into obscurity. Working backward from the solution, I arrived at something more fundamental.

Shiogi's response when I'd asked her about the truth behind Tamamo's death.

Don't be ridiculous. I don't possess that kind of technique. Only "Zigzag" could pull it off that "Don't be ridiculous."

As if I'd muddled something she took it for granted I should know.

Come to think of it, Tamamo had sounded that way too. If the dissonance there, if the significance of our crossed wires was that there was no such student as Yuma Shisei

If.

I already knew Zigzag if I considered not why I hadn't realized, but why I couldn't have realized, then the lies.

Deception.

"I-It can't be."

This wasn't my voice, but Shiogi's. She'd stopped somewhere behind me and had turned as white as a sheet. Her eyes were vacant. She looked aghast despairing. Confused by this sudden change that had come over her, my thought process ground to a halt.

"What's wrong, Shiogi?"

"Th-That quiz was it about the Director?"

" !"

Fierce regret. Damn she'd figured it out.

Of course she had. If someone like me could arrive at a given "solution," there was no reason why Shiogi Hagihara, the best tactician at this academy, couldn't get there too. And I was the one who'd given her the necessary materials to do so. Working backwards from her own words, and from my attitude and that less-than-innocent quiz she'd figured out that there had been an incident, and what that incident was. Inverse operation was the tactician's forte, not the charlatan's. No matter how many times I'd reminded myself that this girl was an expert I had still underestimated her. To be able to figure it all out from such scant information.

What a mind.

A mind so misfortunate, it made me want to cry.

“Bu□no way. The Director□the walkie-talkie.”

Moving like a revenant, a sort of half-smile on her face. With tottering steps, devoid of her usual flowing grace□Shiogi came towards me. Almost as if she was looking to me for salvation. As if she wanted me to take her in my arms.

I was unsure of what to do. Lie? If I lied to her now, would she buy it? Even if I’d succeeded at manipulating her movements, could I manipulate this truth that Shiogi had discovered? No, it wasn’t a question of whether or not I could□it was a question of whether or not I would.

Would I lie to her more than I already had?

Even if it wasn’t nonsense.

“Tell me…is my□” Shiogi paused, barely able to catch her breath. “Is my mother□”

“Yeah. She was murdered, a good long while ago.”

The charlatan didn’t lie.

2

But the real shock to Shiogi in fact came a moment later.

Whum whum whum, a dull sound like the hum of an engine rent the air—and Shiogi's right hand, with which she was about to grab me by the front of my blouse—

Shhhk

detached from her arm at the wrist, like a piece falling off a toy. The hand itself, having lost its fulcrum, went spinning comically through the air until it landed on the floor of the dim, unlit hallway with a thud.

"Uh."

Shiogi stared at her severed hand in astonishment. Then looked down at her right arm, which now came to an abrupt end just below the wrist. She didn't scream. And she managed to choke back her tears. Her eyes continued past her arm—and she turned to look behind her.

It was too dark to see anything. A deep, disturbing blackness. Out of which materialized a girl in a black uniform—

"Guess the jigs are up—"

Along with these words.

"Ms. Jun was right—we all get 'caught in our own webs.' Really, truly, what a washout, this was unanticipated, there were just too many unexpected elements—there was Hagihara, and Saijo, and

then there was you, Master: totally unanticipated. I figured Ms. Jun might bring help, but…never in a million years did I think it'd be someone like you."

With a melancholy smile Ichihime Yukariki took the stage.

"Nh, guh "

Regardless of the fact that her hand had been lopped off Shiogi charged at Hime-chan without hesitation. And she did so regardless of the fact that the distance between them was not the prescribed nine steps, but much farther. At that long range she was no match for Hime-chan.

For Zigzag.

Hime-chan shook her head gently, as if to say, "guess I've got no choice," and revealed her hands, encased in a pair of black gloves.

"We all get 'caught in our own webs' although…"

She performed that little conductor-like movement of hers.

Whipping her finger up, hungrily and snapping it back down with finality.

"This time you're caught in mine. This is the end of your plans, Shiogi, I'm cutting you off."

Whum even as I wondered if I'd actually heard the sound, Shiogi's body froze in midair, but only for a moment, the true blink of an eye and then her body was slashed into zigzagging pieces, cut up like a jigsaw puzzle. Like a tumbling house of blocks, her head and chest and abdomen and shoulders and arms and hands and fingers and hips and buttocks and legs and feet slid apart in perfect rings, one after another in orderly succession, all formalities observed; the pieces scattered across the floor, and finally, the blood began to spray.

This was my second experience with them, so I was just able to make them out. Those hyper-attenuated "lines" crawling through the air like living things. Making the blood shimmer. Making the

darkness shimmer. And there it was again—that whum whum.

The sound of Hime-chan reeling in her lines.

“After all, tactics alone can’t contain the Zigzag, senpai. If you wanted to survive, your only shot was to disable my hands and feet with a surprise attack, like you did the first time—or else to stage our showdown outside, where I can only use my ‘lines’ directly. You had two chances, and you let them both slip away—and that’s why you lose, Hagihara.”

Then Hime-chan added, However.

And continued, “I don’t gets it… Why would a tactician of your caliber waltz right into ‘enemy’ territory like that? You left yourself as open as a high school girl in a teen rom-com… Not that I care.”

When she was finished with this speech, delivered to Shiogi’s severed head where it lay on the ground, Hime-chan turned to me. Treating me to the full radiance of that broad, melancholy grin.

“I feel like I should thank you…but it doesn’t seem like you saved me, does it,” I observed.

“It doesn’t, doesn’t it,” nodded Hime-chan. “It was just that Hagihara figured it out. If possible, Hime-chan didn’t want to kill any of the students—”

“You already killed another one, though. Tamamo.”

“Oh. Right.”

She’d clearly forgotten all about it.

“So I did. Well, witnesses would be a problem.”

Right—Zigzag. When we rappelled down from the school building, she pretended to try and recover her “lines” afterward, but in fact she was just giving a tug on the wire she’d wrapped around Tamamo’s head while we were still up there.

“She’d already contacted Hagihara, though, so I guess it was too

late.”

“…Does a little tug have enough force to sever a human head? It’s not like you’re very strong.”

“Of course. Here’s the thing, Master□Hime-chan doesn’t need to be ‘strong.’ Friction. Pressure, attraction, gravity, magnetism. Tension, stress, resistance, elasticity, centrifugal force, centripetal force. Action, reaction, the principle of oscillation and the principle of the pulley. The recoil coefficient and the friction coefficient□our world is filled with forces we can exploit. Hime-chan doesn’t need ‘strength’ of her own□”

And she lightly flicked her finger. It was hard to tell amid the gloom, but there were dozens of “wires” wrapped around those gloves, layer upon layer, layers layered on layers of lower layers, like a puppeteer, very much indeed like an illusionist□

The glass in the window behind me shattered without a sound.

“Killing a person is easy enough.”

Right. That’s the whole point of webs and the weaver.

“You’re quite the washout, Hime-chan. So Zigzag is the name of your technique… I made a misguided assumption about that…a bit of a misunderstanding. Though you really exploited that assumption to the fullest. O, what a tangled web we weave. I must say, you had me completely fooled.”

“I wasn’t fooling you. Though I did lie to you.”

Sure□same thing.

“When I asked you about ‘Zigzag,’ I thought it was weird that you had so much to say. You’d been so evasive about everything else, always insisting you didn’t understand anything.”

Telling me that “Zigzag” used the genuine article…was nothing more than another of Hime-chan’s expedients. Those strings of hers were plenty good enough. In the hands of a master weaver, any string, no matter how fragile, could mean the end of the line.

And her description of the gloves had been an expedient too, with a little half-truth mixed in. Upon consideration, there was no need to wear them around the clock. If you were using the lines for some more pedestrian purpose, it'd be possible to do it barehanded—just as long as you weren't attempting to kill someone, yup, like right now.

Retreat…was not an option. Since there were likely already "lines" strung haphazardly all through this hallway, like a true spider's web. Most of them were invisible to the naked eye (she must have intentionally woven in a few you could see with the ones you couldn't), but I felt pretty confident that they were there. After confirming that we were in this building over the walkie-talkie, Hime-chan headed us off at the pass. She set this trap and lay in wait for us.

This was a zigzagging "cat's cradle" writ large. Easier said than done, keeping track of the position and tension of every single line, fine-tuning the force of the mediating pulleys, maintaining an awareness of the things that come into contact with the lines, as well as the things that don't, and furthermore controlling it all with the tip of a finger. Outside was one thing, but inside, where there were as many nooks and crannies as one might need to act as pulleys for the "lines"—Zigzag was indeed a peerless, and endlessly adaptable, combat technique. No wonder the four girls who tackled her hadn't even glanced my way. And if I was wondering why Tamamo had lost her concentration and given me my opening, simply at the sound of Hime-chan's voice—well, here was my answer. With a higher-level berserker making her entrance, Tamamo couldn't keep her head. And now it made perfect sense that Shiogi had set her ambush in the courtyard. Good visibility was Hime-chan's Achilles' heel.

"Hunh, it's all coming together…"

The moment Shiogi and I set foot on this floor, we were caught in the spider's web.

"And you killed the Director too, didn't you."

"Yes," she assented as though it was nothing. And then continued as

though it was nothing: “The whole Zigzag thing aside, Master, now that you’ve figured thats out, I have to kill you.”

“Because I figured it out? Did you really think that no one would ever discover the truth?”

“I did. I hoped so. I wished its could be that way. I even prayed for it.”

“…”

“I mean, Ms. Jun is soft on her friends. So she would never suspect Hime-chan.”

Jun Aikawa’s sole blind spot.

Not “betrayal,” but “deception.”

That woman□trusts her friends implicitly.

“But that’s just a blind spot, not a weak spot,” Hime-chan said, sounding sad. “Listen…can you understands at all? Do you have any inkling of what kind of life Ms. Jun has led? A world where everyone is deceiving everyone else, where you kill the person standing next to you before deciding what kind of a person they are□that’s the kind of world she’s lived in, seeing only the filthy side of humanity, and yet she still trusts other people without a second thought. Never suspecting Hime-chan, even for a moment.”

Hime-chan seemed to be getting a little choked up, but definitely wasn’t crying. She was staring intently at me like a vigilant guard dog.

“For people like Hime-chan, that’s basically an insult. No matter how special Jun Aikawa is, she tries harder than anyone to be on equal terms with other people. That right there is the essence of being strong, I guess. Hime-chan could never be like that. I even doubted you right up till the end, Master. When you said, ‘leave it to me,’ I suspected you might be planning to sell us out.”

So when she came after me, it wasn’t out of concern. Not only that, when she came after me the first time, the time I left the Director’s

office, that was just for the sake of risk avoidance. It was all lies, all false.

When she cried for me.

When she restrained me.

When she came after me.

When she saved me.

Even when she smiled for me.

She was just putting on an act, playing the role of the kind of girl I like.

“Buuut,” Hime-chan declared, “other people are unbelievable, aren’t they!”

She laughed, willy-nilly imitating her own pure smile with a forced cheerfulness. Yet it was nothing more than a twisted distortion of her mouth into a warped curve.

“They betray you at the drop of a hat, deceive you, and explain it all away. They dismiss other people without a second thought. They hit other people anytime they feel like it, despite the fact that they know it’ll hurt, precisely because they know it’ll hurt. Basically, everyone□everyone is a fake.”

“Is it lonely, being so alone?”

“Yes, it is,” she answered immediately. “It’s lonely□still, I’ll live my life alone. Betraying, deceiving, and explaining it all away. I’ll lives my life alone.”

“That so… Guess it is, at that.”

“If we keeps on talking I’m going to start feeling sympathetic, so it’s time to bring this to an end.”

And Hime-chan whipped her finger up. In that instant, an unpleasant chill assaulted my body. A-ha, so this was the feeling of

having those “lines” coiled all around your body. It all made sense now. In other words, that sensation I felt the very first time I met her back in “Year 2, Class A” was nothing else. Did I have one foot in the grave from that very first hello? So then I wasn’t hallucinating when I sensed that locker shake, and it also explained why my feet got all tangled up. There must’ve been invisible threads winding through that classroom.

I was dead meat.

That time, because of her wariness at our first encounter.

And now, because I’d learned too much.

“I’ll tell Ms. Jun that Master left ahead of us or something. Okay, bye-bye. Time to say farewell, Master.”

“If you’re worried about sympathy, it’s too late for me, you know.”

The finger that was about to snap down for the final time stopped.

“Did you…says something?”

“I guess this is the first time I’m saying it out loud. You’re…terribly similar. To a girl I destroyed when I was a kid. That girl was openhearted, always smiling, and never suspicious or angry, a real good egg, she’d forgive you for anything, and above all, she was kind enough to love me.”

“Then we’re not similar at all, are we?” Hime-chan muttered, lowering her gaze. With lowered gaze, she muttered, “Hime-chan isn’t a good girl. That’s all superficial. I’m suspicious of everyone, and I’m always annoyed, plus I’ve never once fallen in love. It’s all an act. An act, a pack of lies. I was just playing up to you. That kind of person…doesn’t really exist, do they?”

She wasn’t like her, she’d just acted like it.

Since that kind of person doesn’t really exist.

“Yeah. I thought so too. I told myself that this kind of person shouldn’t exist. Which is why I smashed that kind of thing to bits.

Goodwill is fake, and trust is counterfeit, so I ruthlessly stomped it all to pieces.”

“…”

“It was incredibly cathartic. The best feeling ever. Just thinking about it makes me feel like the sun’s come out. That must be what people mean when they talk about happiness. And…I fell straight into the jaws of regret. I’d destroyed something authentic and irreplaceable. And that girl wasn’t strong like Aikawa. Being deceived by me, the person she loved, that could only have been the end for her. And I knew it, or should have□”

Why was I waxing on about this?

About my sins.

Was it repentance? Not a chance. Atonement? Not quite.

Yeah□I was just hoping for a do-over, it was that simple.

Because even if Hime-chan coming after me out of concern was a lie, the conversation we had when she did wasn’t. Even if her words had been directed at herself instead of me.

Hime-chan had said it was all lies.

And I think that was the truth.

And yet□honestly. Honestly. Honestly, I’m telling you.

If this world were truly just as Hime-chan says it is, just as I think it is.

Then we’d be able to get by without this much suffering.

Don’t you see?

If even the way you were trembling when you protected me from Shiogi was an act□if even that was a lie, then this world holds nothing but lies. And if everything’s a lie and there’s not a shred of truth anywhere□if there’s no point of comparison, then that’s the

same as saying that everything is true.

“Why did you kill the Director?”

“Is the fact that she was the Director of this academy not reason enough? Would you be more satisfied if Hime-chan had been through alls kinds of horrible experiences at her hands? If my friends had been killed? If I’d been raped? If something important had been taken from me? Would that be a thoroughly satisfying, neatly wrapped up happily-ever-after for you? Do you think I’m an idiot? That’s not how killing someone works, Master.”

I was being lectured about the meaning of murder by a teenage girl. A seventeen-year-old girl, going on about the finer points of crime, and punishment. It was an abnormal situation. So abnormal that it was hard to accept, even within the precincts of the academy known as Hang ’Em High.

“Then let me ask you a different question. Did you kill the Director because you wanted to get out of here? Or did you decide to get out of here as part of your strategy to kill the Director?”

“Both. And neither,” replied Hime-chan coldly. “I wanted to destroy this school. I wanted to pull it up by the roots, to do away with the whole place in one fell swoop so that not a single blade of grass remained, so that not a trace, not an ounce, not a hint of a shadow of a memory was left.”

“When we were first discovered by those two girls, you did that on purpose, didn’t you? That’s why you didn’t tell me anything upfront.”

“That’s right. Since if we succeeded in escaping, we couldn’t go to the Director’s office. And I was pretty sure that was what Ms. Jun would decide to do.”

“And while we were running away, when I had you tucked under my arm, you took the campus map out of my pocket.”

“If you had a map, you wouldn’t be able to gets lost.”

“And you didn’t use Zigzag to dismember the Director because if

you had, Aikawa would've been on to you."

"Yup. You might be able to fool insight, but you can't fool sight."

"So you fooled her by using a chainsaw to dismember the body instead."

"It's like you were rights there in the room with me."

"And you tricked Shiogi and company by posing as the Director on the walkie-talkie, so you could move them around like chess pieces and get them to do whatever you wanted."

"Exactly. Though they didn't do what I wanted, did they."

"That leaves well, some puzzles that need solving, but that about covers the preface. So let's get to the real topic at hand, Hime-chan. Let's talk about the future."

"Huh?"

Hime-chan looked at me dubiously. A swirling maelstrom of overpoweringly negative emotions lodged in those pupils of hers. Not like I gave a shit about getting killed, not like it wasn't a completely futile non-action, I couldn't care less…

But I would do what I could.

That was my job.

Everything around me goes insane. Strategies and calculations go off the rails, nothing goes as planned.

Hime-chan.

I'll help bring your goals to nothing. I'll help bring your determination to ruin. I'll help bring all your hopes and dreams, your wishes, your prayers, crashing down around your ears. How does that sound?

"The future?"

“That’s what I said. It feels crappy when the future is vague, doesn’t it? Uncertain elements are a bummer…right? Everybody wants a bright future, don’t they?”

“Wh-What□”

“Either way, if you do get out of here, you’ve got nowhere to go, do you, Hime-chan? So why not come with me? My building’s pretty rundown, but there just so happens to be an empty room on the first floor right now. The rent is a stunningly affordable ten thousand yen a month. There’s no bath, but a public one is close by. I can’t say it’s a great building, but it’s a pretty fun place. The people who live there are cool. And it’s really the people who make a home a home. Take my word for it. The first person I should introduce you to is Miiko Asano, she’s a swordswoman. Miiko’s a little bit older than me, a real dignified lady, and she takes good care of me. I’m sure she’d adore you, Hime-chan.”

“Are…you□”

“On the top floor there’s an old Christian dude. I don’t know his real name, but he’s a funky old guy, he’s a rapper. He’s fun just to look at. But he’s dangerous, so don’t get too close… Then there’s a brother and sister, Moeta Ishinagi and Hoko Yamiguchi. Can’t forget those two. Moeta’s a tough customer, but his sister’s the innocent type. If she likes you, you’re golden.”

“What are you□”

“On the first floor, there’s a female college student who just moved in. She’d be your next-door neighbor, Hime-chan. She’s in her third year at Roshisha University, and her name’s Nanami Nanananami. She’s the worst, super uptight. I’d love it if your easygoing personality rubbed off on her a little.”

“What are you, talk□”

“And my room’s on the second floor, come up anytime. As far as school goes, it’s not like you’ve got anything else to do, so give it a shot. If you want to be a good kid, every day can’t actually be Sunday. You’d never find a real job with that attitude, so let’s see, I

guess that'd make you a transfer student. You might have a hard time keeping up with the classes after going to this dumbass academy, but that's where I come in. I'll look out for you, I'll be your tutor. Then that name might actually start to mean something."

"□ing about□"

"And we'll all have tons of fun□all of us, together."

"What are you talking about!" Hime-chan finally exploded. "You're about to get zigzagged! So all this□all this stuff you're saying, everything you've been saying, I don't wanna hear it! There□there's no future! No future at all, not for Hime-chan!"

Being able to think about the future is proof that you still have leeway. If you really are living each day like it's your last, you don't have time to think about such things.

Each day, like it's your last□you're going to die anyway, no matter what you do, so.

"So you're going down with the ship? A double suicide with this stupid school? That's just childish selfishness. What am I supposed to do, caught up in some girl's rotten emotions?"

"Did you say□girl's, rotten?"

"Am I wrong? The way you do things is cowardly and rotten□but most of all, you're a cute girl. Which is way better than being a rotten guy like me, and yet you're throwing away your future… Is that why□the one person you didn't want to be hated by was Aikawa? Because she's a woman? Aikawa was the one person you didn't want to think of you as a 'murderer.' You didn't care about anyone besides her…and if this was going to be the end, I guess you wanted to end it by her side? Sentimentalism, romanticism, or plain old heroism…whichever one it was, it's a far cry from my beloved stoicism. Honestly, I'm a little disappointed. By you."

"What do you□what do you know about it!" Now Hime-chan really was crying. This was no lie, those were real tears. And she didn't try

to hide them as she yelled at me. Like she was accusing me, in a voice so loud I thought her throat was going to tear itself apart. “Don’t talk like you understand how I feel! What do you know about the feelings of someone who’s gotten used to killing!”

“If nothing else I know that you’re a weepy little girl. In the end you’re just scared, like everybody else. You’re frightened because you don’t know whether Aikawa will accept you or not. You’re suspicious of the fact that Aikawa trusts you. Which is why you’re testing her trust like this.”

I understood her feelings as if they were my own.

I understood them as I understand my own.

I understood them as my own.

“‘What’ll I do if Jun Aikawa hates me’—and ‘even if she doesn’t hate me,’ ‘if I amount to so little that I’m not worth hating even though I’ve done all this’—”

“Hahaha…”

All emotion suddenly, rapidly departed from Hime-chan’s face—positive and negative, life and death, all gone. She made a complete about-face, a turn to the dark side—becoming totally expressionless.

“Thank you so much, Master.”

These obviously empty words of gratitude came lightly to her lips.

“I got to have a nice dream there before the end.”

And, like the conductor of an orchestra.

“So that’s how it is…” I said. “Guess it is, at that.”

No good, huh?

Of course not, how could someone like me, someone who can’t even look after himself, look after someone else’s needs? Total failure.

Was this the true non-action?

I'd shown her a nice dream□

But if the reality was shit, then it didn't mean a thing.

A non-factoring non-action.

"Oh, right. I still don't know your name."

"…"

I waffled once more, right at the end. Despite the fact that, seconds before, I'd been trying to save this girl…now I was thinking about destroying her. I couldn't decide: should I give this girl, who was teetering on the precipice, that final push over the edge? If I could destroy her, then I probably should.

It would probably feel good.

To obliterate this lovely young lady.

"Since it's come to this, I can't calls you Master anymore… I'll do you the honor of calling you by your name. So please tell it to me."

Tell you my name. Tell you my full name. You want me to snap every last one of your little zigzagging strings?

"Well…"

But I didn't do that.

It didn't seem necessary anymore.

"Guess I bought enough time for a costume change."

"What's that? Is that…your name?" asked Hime-chan, ingenuously.

Ahhh□so good-natured.

Everyone is just so good-natured.

Almost makes me feel like I'm the villain.

“Just talking to myself, Hime-chan… Don’t worry about it. And you said it yourself.”

“Huh?” Hime-chan squinted one eye in confusion. “See, the thing is, Hime-chan was asking you your name□”

“I said it too, and so did Shiogi□but you were the one who said it first, Hime-chan. Jun Aikawa is soft on her friends.”

“…?”

“It’s true that I left the Director’s office of my own accord…but she’s the one who brought me here to Hang ’Em High in the first place. So don’t you think it’d be kind of a lonely ending□if she didn’t come to my rescue?”

“…!”

Hime-chan whirled around.

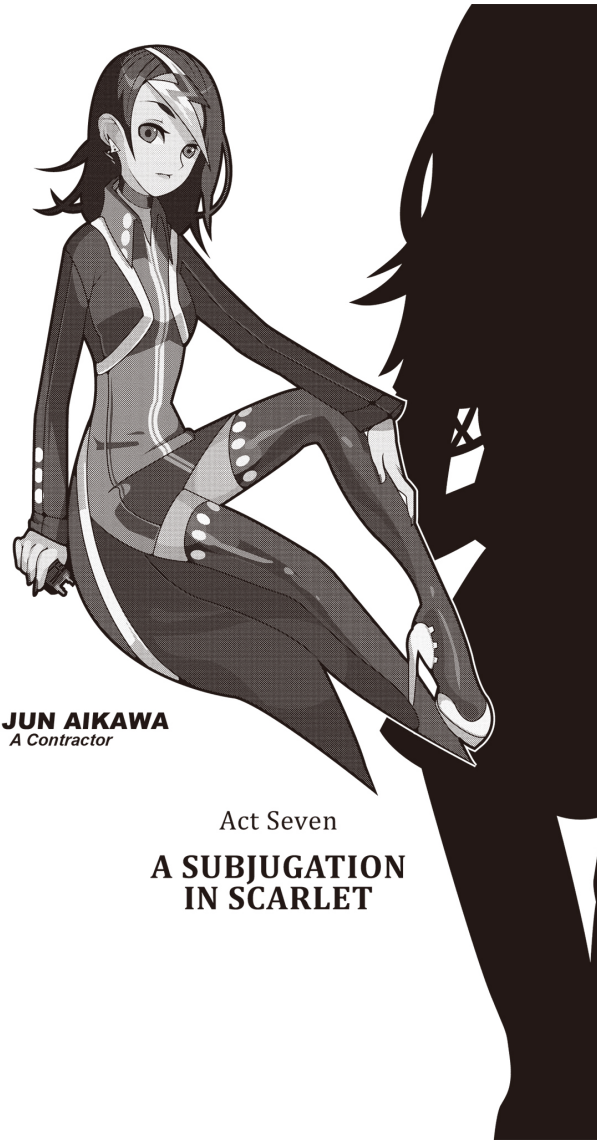
And there before her eyes□

Vermillion as the flames of a carmine conflagration.

Crimson as spilt blood, the scarlet of hell itself.

The contractor was simply there.

A cynical smirk playing across her face.



JUN AIKAWA
A Contractor

Act Seven

A SUBJUGATION IN SCARLET

0

The bullied one is the cause,

And the bully is effective.

1

What does the word “strength” really mean? If, like the standard for happiness and unhappiness, strength and weakness can only be evaluated relatively, then rejecting everything outside of oneself would be defined as strength, while accepting everything prior to oneself would be defined as weakness. Or maybe not, but in making any kind of judgment, one requires both a unit of measurement and a standard by which to measure.

Does it simply refer to bodily strength? Or an outsized presence? Does it mean physical solidity, or does it indicate mental obduracy? Simply because someone is always overbearing and cocky doesn’t mean they’re the strongest. Handling everything flawlessly, excelling at any and all skills, that alone isn’t enough to put you on top of the heap. Even mastering a single ability just makes you a genius, it doesn’t mean you can have whatever you want, or eradicate everything you don’t. Neither invincibility nor peerlessness alone constitutes a definition of “strongest.” And words like honor and glory are in fact its antonyms. So how can you possibly determine that someone is the strongest? If you take this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, you’ll end up at a more or

less self-contradictory argument.

But if I were to present this train of reasoning to her, I'm sure she'd flash her usual nihilistic smile and say□

"I'm the strongest, and because I'm the strongest I don't need a reason."

"Thing is…"

Aikawa slowly spread her arms, showing off her bright-red outfit, and looked at me and Hime-chan. That cynical smile was still plastered on her face.

"I couldn't bear to wear anything but this for the climax. Black just wouldn't have worked for the big finish. Ugh, I hadda go all the way back to the Cobra, and it ate up a lot more time than I expected. Sorry I'm late, Iitan."

Hime-chan was shaking uncontrollably. Her whole body was heaving. As if she couldn't wrap her mind around it: Why is Aikawa there, or rather, Why isn't Aikawa here, with me?

"It doesn't makes a difference… Buying time with his silver tongue is the nonsense user's favorite trick, after all, isn't it, Ms. Aikawa?"

"I've told you not to call me by my last name… Only my 'enemies' do that. So□" Aikawa's smile didn't slip as she fixed her gaze on Hime-chan. "Which're you gonna call me?"

"Ah, uh□"

"What the hell do you think you're doing, anyway?"

"Ah…"

"I asked you what the hell you're doing. Well?"

"Then□"

Still trembling.

“Then this is the end? Just like that?”

Shaking like a leaf.

“Why□”

Her quavering voice filled with all the emotion she could muster.

“□am I such a screw-up?” she shouted in a heartbreaking voice so small that it seemed like it might vanish altogether. “Where did I go wrong? Huh?” she asked, not of Aikawa, but of me. “I thought so hard about it… I considered it from every angle, and I was sure it’d go smoothly. Did Hime-chan□do something wrong?”

“…Hime-chan.”

“Seriously, am I really this much of a screw-up?”

“The hell’s that got to do with it?” Aikawa cut in. “Remember what I said about getting ‘caught in your own web’□you’ve been overthinking this to death, you and Iitan both. Not to mention that little lady lying on the ground there. Man, this hallway is drenched in blood. Dammit□don’t you assholes have anything better to do? Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re both under the impression that everything can be explained logically, aren’cha?” Aikawa scratched her head in frustration, like she was genuinely baffled. Then, heaving a sigh so long that it seemed to last for an eternity and for an instant, she started yelling, “Logic is nothing more than one plus one equals two. And theory just means zero plus zero equals zero. If you wanna see some neat, clean logic, go read a first-grade math textbook or something. Relying on that kind of infantile shit, clinging to it, bowing down to it□are you really both such drooling idiots?!”

She wasn’t smiling anymore□she was pissed.

Insanely pissed. Violently furious.

“I’m such a screw-up, this is the end… Listen to you, shamelessly mewling like a whipped dog! Makes me red in the face just listening

to you! You think I need to be any redder, you idiot?! Huh?? You think as long as you survive, that counts as a job well done? As long as no one finds out the truth, it's a full success? You think you get to decide when it starts and ends? Bullshit! You moron, this idiotic farce could never have succeeded! You wanna hop on the bandwagon with all these traumatized little brats and their boo-hoo-hooing? I'll give you something to cry about!"

"W-Wah…"

Weeping profusely, Hime-chan retreated a step, as if blown back by the force of Aikawa's words. The unpleasant sensation of those "lines" being wrapped around my body was gone. No time to worry about holding me captive in the face of Jun Aikawa—and keeping a hostage would only be counterproductive against her anyway. Hime-chan probably knew this all too well. Which is exactly why she'd wanted to keep Aikawa on her side.

Or—maybe that wasn't why?

That was part of it, but Hime-chan was simply…

"This ain't funny—I'm not the slightest bit amused! If you're going to make an enemy of me, at least give me a little chuckle! Everyone averts their eyes from what they should really be doing, squandering every little thing they've got, making excuses, lying, sidestepping—creeping around like servile little worms! Shape up! It couldn't be simpler, just don't slack off! Why can't you guys get it together?! Straighten out already!"

That's just it…

That's the one thing we can't do.

Both Hime-chan, and me.

But now Aikawa had gotten up a head of steam, and she couldn't keep her anger in check.

"Puff out your chest, stand up straight, take pride in yourself, roar at your enemies, don't hang your head! Never back down, never give up, and don't think you can just end it whenever you want!

You feeling all sympathetic, you little shits?! Don't cozy up to each other, don't get attached, it's gross, what're you, animals?! Don't involve someone else in your own narcissism, you wanna worry, go ahead and worry, but don't come crying to me, you think I can help you with your weird issues?! Look at you, licking each other's wounds. There's no place for compromise here! Don't dismiss it out of hand, and don't find some abstruse reason to accept it! Forget about everything else and just worry about your own decisions!"

"Shut up!" shouted Hime-chan, clutching her stomach and glaring back at Aikawa.

The tears were gone. Nowhere to be found. Her eyes were no longer those of a teenage girl they were zigzag eyes, slashed to pieces somewhere inside, rotten to the core.

It had all been an act.

Her purity, her naïveté. Her good works and her goodwill.

If it had all been an act then still, even after being saved.

"It's over, this is the end! The truth's been revealed… All the killing the broken promises, the betrayals "

Betrayal, betrayal, betrayal.

Tricking your friends first, in order to trick your enemies.

Repeated over and over and over.

Hime-chan was so pitiful. Too painful to look at. Too painful to abandon.

"That's…enough, Hime-chan"

"Shut up, be quiet, shut your mouth! Stop calling me that! Why don't you learn some manners!" yelled Hime-chan, glaring at me this time, her eyes bugging out of her head. It was an expression without a shred of purity or loveliness. And yet, no expression could've aroused more pity in me. "Don't be kind to me! Don't get up on your high horse and think you can do me a favor by being my

friend! It's—it's disgusting!"

"…Hime-chan."

"What the hell is that face? Do you feel bad for me? Compassionate, even? And you were so repulsed by murder…how kind of you. But—it's not just the Director, and Saijo and Hagihara. You know that, right?"

She scrutinized me with something like pity in turn, her eyes filled with a deep-seated malice that didn't suit her at all.

"Have you still not figured out—why none of the 'faculty' or 'security' ever showed up?"

How could they, when that was all taken care of before I ever even set foot on the school grounds—

I tried to envision it.

The faculty building. The staff room.

Just beneath the floor of the Director's office—sealed up tight.

A bloodbath unfolding within—

"Murder" didn't cover it anymore.

"Serial killer" didn't quite work either.

That enclosed space.

Obstructed on all four sides by walls, with no way to see inside. To see living people—or dead people. No way to see inside, not until the walls crumbled.

And—

By that time, it'd already be too late.

"Either way, this academy is finished."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," Aikawa said. "But you don't get to

decide when it's over." She pointed at Hime-chan. "I won't let you."

"I keep telling you! Enough already, Ms. Aikawa! Enough, it's all over!"

Calling Aikawa by her last name—Hime-chan flicked up both arms.

Whum whum whum—that sound, like a child whimpering, like the air being rent into a vacuum, reverberated down the hall, all of it aimed at Jun Aikawa. Because of their thinness and speed, it was impossible to visually track them. Yes, it was an undeniable fact: the moment we'd set foot in this hallway, we were caught in Hime-chan's spider web. Visibility was poor, and even the world's strongest had no hope of avoiding every one of the myriad "lines" closing in on her from all directions by way of every bump and hollow of this locked-room hallway.

But the contractor—

Didn't even try to avoid them at all.

The invisible wires coiled all around Aikawa's body. Hime-chan herself was so taken aback that she stopped moving, and as she stood there staring in surprise, Aikawa snarled, "What's the problem? Oh, sorry, did you want me to try and dodge these? Not losing your nerve this late in the game, are ya? Or, hahaha, were you hoping I'd end your life for you?"

"…nh. Guh."

"Bull's-eye, huh? Well, sorry to disappoint, but I'm eeeeever so fond of you. I will ostentatiously, thoroughly, and without reservation spare no effort in sparing you. Don't expect me to be your easy way out. I'm not going to kill you, I'm going to give you all the tepid love I can muster, so we'll never be apart again. Ha, though I'm pretty sure death might be the only way to cure you of your stupidity."

"Don't you, make fun, of me…" Chewing her lower lip, Hime-chan shivered uncontrollably. Not in fear, not anymore. This was rage—rage at Aikawa. Or was it—the battle frenzy of the zigzag

berserker?

“You’ve really improved, though, allow me to compliment you on that. Casting your webs so precisely without weighting the ends of the lines… You could find a lifetime gig with an acrobatic troupe if you wanted. Who are you, Takuya Yamashiro? Way to perfect such a pain-in-the-ass skill. Could it be? Do you still feel beholden to her?” Aikawa sneered at Hime-chan, clearly mocking her.

At being openly insulted like this despite holding the overwhelmingly superior position□and the home-field advantage, Hime-chan’s face twisted and she screamed with all her might, “Do you not even realize this is checkmate, Ms. Aikawa?!”

“Look at this jumped-up pawn, prattling on and on. Sorry to say I was born a queen□what do I care if lesser pieces like the king get taken?”

Hime-chan seemed determined□but then, for an instant, she hesitated. An instant is only an instant, though, and she whipped both determined arms into the air at the same time. “This is the end of the line! Your objective□”

And for the final time□

“First, despair. I hit my cutoff with you a long time ago, you little shit.”

And□and I must’ve been seeing things, but Aikawa smiled with a certain tenderness.

“Also, relax. Because the bonds between us can never be cut.”

2

Before she could snap her arms down for the final time, Hime-chan herself collapsed to the floor of the hallway. Or perhaps I should say, she pitched forward, as if her body was being dragged down by her own arms. She lay facedown in a very unflattering position, with a look on her face that made it clear she had no idea what had happened.

“Huh? What the…”

“Anything the matter? Lose your balance? Hm?”

Aikawa had not, of course, been sliced to pieces. She just stood there grinning, acting like she had nothing whatsoever to worry about. Hime-chan immediately tried to get up, but in this too she failed, ending up flat on her face like a passed-out drunk.

When I looked at Aikawa there was no indication that she’d done anything at all. Of course not, at this distance how could she? In the absence of any missile weapons, and without recourse to superpowers, to send Hime-chan sprawling like that…

Or wait.

Was her position slightly different than it had been before?

“Seems like you use a lot of different ‘lines’ to create variation in weight, speed, and thickness. Still, the principle of the weaver’s attack is always the same. Using ‘speed’ and ‘thinness’ to cut. Kind of like slicing bread, I suppose. In which case there are, broadly speaking, two ways of avoiding it ‘moving slowly.’ And ‘moving quickly.’”

Aikawa’s words were clearly contradictory. Hime-chan ignored them in her frantic attempts to get back up, but every time she tried, she went sprawling ungainly on the floor once more, as if

something was dragging her back down. Almost as if—almost as if she was a puppet, dancing on an unseen string…

“Ah.”

“Light bulb finally going off, Iitan? Yup, you got it. As long as I’m outside that ‘web barrier’ she’s got strung up—regardless of what surfaces she’s using as mediating pulleys, the lines wound around me right now are all connected to her gloves. So it’s a piece of cake, right? As long as I move faster than Himecchi does, I’m fine. As long as I’m faster, and stronger.”

The moment I figured it out—Aikawa’s position shifted again. And at the same time, Hime-chan collapsed again to the ground as if dragged down by her own arms. I guess in principle it was like holding a dog’s leash. But all Hime-chan had to do was move her fingers. In that sense, her small stature and short reach were well-suited to being a weaver. She could lift and lower her finger much more quickly than the average person, which gave her a serious advantage. By contrast, Aikawa had to move her entire body, since the lines were wrapped all around her. Very much easier said than done.

“The drawback to this as a killing technique is the time lag between impetus and impact. And that lag is decisive when you’re dealing with me. However fast your lines may be—against me, they’re light-years too slow. And even if we move at the same speed, victory goes to the stronger—it’s just a tug of war, Ichihime. Weakness is tragic, isn’t it. Turns out strength is important after all. I don’t know how dangerous these threads you’ve got wrapped around me are, but as long as I can move faster than them, they’re nothing but accessories. Ha, nothing more than a street performer’s trick. If you can only target people who are standing still, you’ll never be a killer like her.”

“Sh-Shut up—shut up shut up—” Hime-chan glared at Aikawa from where she lay immobile on the hallway floor. “H-How can this—”

It was a good question, how can this be? Who would ever expect their target to move faster than the flick of a finger? It felt like it wasn’t Aikawa who was fast but us who were slow, like Aikawa

herself wasn't moving and the observers, me and Hime-chan, were revolving around her in tandem. There was no wind-up and no follow-through, very much indeed like a superpower, like she was teleporting.

There was no time lag whatsoever between when Aikawa decided to move and when she'd already begun moving. Starting and stopping simultaneously—it wasn't that she acted quickly, she acted so quickly that one action became the next.

"Aww. I guess this is how it goes when your opponent is just some little brat," Aikawa sneered maliciously, looking down her nose at Hime-chan where she lay like a baby crawling across the floor. "A duel to the death with you turns out to be pretty boring after all. I'm done."

"Done? Please, give me a break—in that case, there's still a way!" groaned Hime-chan. "Even if you can neutralize my direct attacks, Ms. Aikawa, as long as you can't cross this barrier—"

"You're not listening. I told you, the bonds between us can never be cut, we're connected."

Aikawa opened her fist, revealing the stun gun clutched inside it. Hime-chan's eyes went wide, but it was too late. There was no way she could reel in her lines from where she lay crumpled on the floor, and Aikawa had most likely tangled them up anyway. Finally realizing this, Hime-chan tried to get the gloves off her hands, but—

She was, indeed, too slow.

Against Jun Aikawa, she was light-years too slow.

The contractor unhesitatingly jabbed the tip of the stun gun into her own arm and pressed the switch.

It was all over in a flash—would not be a wholly accurate statement.

It was over before that moment arrived, long before, the instant Hime-chan decided to take on Aikawa.

Hime-chan tensed up like someone had pushed the pause button.

Then, she started twitching like a shrimp and flipped violently over to lie face up with her back arched, freezing once more in that position and at length, as black smoke started to rise from her smoldering form, she slumped to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut. She seemed to have completely lost consciousness, but her body continued twitching and spasming.

“Dear oh dear…and after I took the trouble to change and everything.”

Aikawa looked down with regret at her clothing, scorched like Hime-chan herself, and tugged idly at the frayed ends. Parts of her shoulders and belly were exposed, which was quite a sight, but it wouldn’t do to stare so I turned to peer at Hime-chan once more. She was still twitching. The spasms in her fingers, which had borne the brunt of the direct electrical discharge, were particularly severe. They continued to vibrate minutely, as if each was a distinct creature with a will of its own.

“Gwa. Right, I guess aramid fiber is an insulator. There’re still a few lines left. Is this Kevlar? Shit, am I gonna have to unravel these myself? What a goddamn pain in the ass.”

Grumbling away, Aikawa began to extricate herself from the remaining lines that hadn’t been fried by the electric shock. Without their master to control them, they were apparently not easy to reckon with, and she seemed to be struggling. Enjoying the sight of Aikawa in this fix, I said, “So this is what the stun gun was for, huh?” Asking this sort of question also fell within the purview of my job.

“Yeah. I toldja, didn’t I? That ‘the need arose to get a certain person out of here in one piece.’”

“I was sure it’d been for me.”

“Hunh? Why? I’d never do something so horrible to my beloved Iitan,” Aikawa dissembled. “Well, worrying about foolish brats is all part of the job. If I was going to take on her Zigzag directly, I couldn’t do it without injuring her.”

So being armed actually made Aikawa weaker?

Maybe an explanation is unnecessary, but here we go: Aikawa had applied her pocket-sized stun gun, which put out enough voltage to knock out a person's memory of the past two or three days (and that was with the limiter on), to Hime-chan's "lines." This time Aikawa had the limiter off; she unleashed the maximum voltage, piling on more than the usual current. It was basically like touching a power line. This was no ordinary hit from a stun gun…it was a massive burst of power, more like an explosive. Sparks went flying all around the hallway. It was such a mindboggling discharge that I'd gotten a taste of it just from standing nearby.

No matter how robust the various strings might've been, it was difficult to stand up to such high voltage and high heat at the same time, and the majority of them had been fried instantly□but that instant while they were still intact was more than enough. Their master had taken maximum damage. Excepting the insulators among them, all of the "lines" had become Aikawa's weapons.

If her opponent's trump card was speed, Aikawa would overpower her with that very speed. If they used strings against her, she would exploit those very strings. Hime-chan thought she'd caught Aikawa in her web□but it was the other way around.

No matter how large a web the spider weaves.

The eagle can penetrate it effortlessly.

"…"

Connected to the same lines, Aikawa was of course subject to the same conditions. And not only that (I don't know what she was thinking), she'd applied the stun gun directly to her own arm, so she must've taken the same high□no, an even higher voltage than Hime-chan. You could say it was like settling things with a suicide bomb, except that Aikawa seemed totally fine. She had lost neither consciousness nor her memory, and was unharmed save for her clothing□it was lined with custom insulation, hence the costume change… That kind of explanation would certainly add up, but I didn't see the need for such trivial arithmetic in the face of this

contractor. Jun Aikawa could probably crash a plane into the crater of a volcano and walk away without a scratch. Theorizing about someone who transcends theory is a losing proposition. Even if it seems illogical, zero factorial still equals one.

“Whoa, these threads are all tangled! Ow, they’re biting into my skin! What are you standing around for, help me! Are you the Devil or something?!”

“…”

I approached Aikawa without a word and carefully undid the lines one by one. My fingertips got a little cut up, but somehow I managed to undo enough of them that Aikawa could move freely.

“Woweee. Thanks, Iichan. Wawawa. I love you Iichan!”

“Please don’t do that.”

I really hated it.

“C’mon, I’m just trying to get equal stage-time for the other characters…”

“Then how about doing an impression of Akari?”

“I can’t just do anyone on command…”

“Getting angry like that□I didn’t know you had it in you.” I looked down at Hime-chan where she lay fallen. “So you get plain old angry sometimes, all recrimination and forgiveness aside?”

“I hate you! I never want to see your face again so hurry up and die, you pig-fucking bastard!”

“…?”

“Akari Chiga.”

“Enough already.”

Though it did make me a tiny bit happy.

“Hah. I’m insanely big-hearted, but I’ve got a seriously short fuse. Unlike you. In fact, I can transform into a Super Saiyan once a week.”

“Uh huh…”

Might actually be true.

“Against a jackass like Zerozaki who’s always ready to throw down, I can really let myself go and have some fun. Overthinkers like you guys, though, always hemming and hawing, you annoy the crap out of me.”

“This is like some prime-time soap about a high school. Not that this place is anything like a high school…”

“‘I just wanted you to pay attention to me, teacher,’ that kind of thing? When was the last time you watched TV, Iitan? But listen, it doesn’t really have anything to do with that, ya know,” Aikawa said with a grin. “Not like my lecture was ever going to get through to her. You’d already taken care of the lecturing. Since no matter what I said, I was coming from a position of safety. If you tell a starving person that ‘man cannot survive on bread alone,’ they’re going to tell you to go to hell, right? But you’d already done the convincing, she could relate to you. Thankfully I just had to take care of the cleanup.”

Is that how it was?

I didn’t think so, but if that were true…then maybe I’d been able to save Hime-chan, just a tiny bit. I, who could do no saving, had saved Hime-chan, who was beyond salvation. That right there was nothing more than a record-breakingly broken contradiction.

“Then again, hahaha, no matter how cool you manage to sound, the skirt kind of ruins the effect.”

“Did you have to say that? I’d almost forgotten about it, dammit. Still, I guess it’s finally over.”

“I keep telling everybody,” Aikawa smacked me upside the head. “You can’t just decide it’s over. For cryin’ out loud. Don’t you get it?

Life's never over, not even when we die."

"Not even when we die?" That was a novel opinion.

"Yeah. Even after you're dead, your influence lingers on. The truth is, nothing's ever over. Same's true for her… Maybe you'll understand when you're a little more grown up? But even if you don't, at least act like you do. That alone'll make a huge difference."

"That's not something I want to understand, though," I said, then looked down at Hime-chan. "What'll become of her? If this school's done for… But with something this big, escaping, dropping out, those questions aren't relevant anymore, are they? She killed the Director, after all."

"No idea. My job is to get Ichihime out of here, anything after that is outside the terms of my contract□or at least I'd like to think so. But I guess that's not gonna fly? The girl's no stranger to me, so yeah, I'll deal with it."

"I see."

She really is soft on her friends.

But that, that above all, is what makes her the strongest.

"First things first, we'll hand her over to the police."

"That's terrible!"

"Wawaa! Ikkun's pissed! I only said what anybody would say! That's like playing strip poker, but in the middle of a contest to see who can stand being in the sun the longest!"

"Enough with the impressions already."

It was too late, no one could stop Jun Aikawa now.

"Kahaha. Well, this is one hell of a riot." With this impression of Mr. No Longer Human, Aikawa sat down beside Hime-chan, who'd finally stopped twitching. Lovingly, and with a certain air of

resignation, the world's strongest stroked Hime-chan's face and remarked with a little nod, "When she's asleep, she just looks like a sweet kid… Dammit, the little shit."

Her gesture was like that of an older sister dealing with a sibling who was a real handful, and it somehow struck me as charming. Aikawa was absolutely not a tender person, truly not at all a pleasant person. But she still couldn't just abandon a girl like Hime-chan.

"…Hm."

"What's wrong?"

"This is no good. Her heart's stopped."

"You mean she's never going to wake up?!"

Everyone, be careful with stun guns.

I'm serious.

"Oh well. If she dies, no big deal."

"It's a huge deal!"

"The perp is one of us!"

"And it wouldn't be me! Why the hell did you have to take the limiter off the stun gun?! The regular voltage probably would've been plenty to knock her out!"

"But it wouldn't have fried the lines."

So she did it because she couldn't be bothered to untangle them by hand?!

"It's fine, I'll resuscitate her right now… Chill out, Iitan, your dryness is your best quality. Try to keep what little personality you have."

Aikawa leaned over to begin CPR, then seemed to change her mind

and looked up at me again.

“You wanna take a shot at it, Iitan? This is your big chance to get in there without being called a pedophile.”

“Don’t play around with people’s lives! Please, this is serious!”

“What’s your problem, does it gross you out? Yeah, artificial respiration definitely does have kind of a necrophilia vibe.”

“Exactly, I know it’s me we’re talking about here, but dead bodies are one thing that even I’m not into—wait, scratch that!” For the first time in his life, the nonsense user was so flustered that he played the straight man to his own joke. “Quit fooling around! Do you have some disease where you can’t be serious for more than five seconds?!”

“Man, you’ve got no sense of humor… What a stick in the mud. You stupid idiot. I can’t stand you, Ikkun.”

And at long last, Aikawa began life-saving procedures. While she was doing the chest compressions, I could hear Hime-chan’s ribs snapping one after another, but let’s file that under unavoidable. Aikawa continued for five minutes, ten minutes, then stood up and said, “’Kay, all finished. She’s back.”

“Taking this pretty lightly, aren’t you…”

Life and death, killing, being killed, did the world’s strongest even get a do-over on these kinds of things? I sailed past astounded and ended up feeling empty.

This was really no big deal to her. Performances and lies, falsehood and deception, no matter what else happened, such things were irrelevant to Jun Aikawa. And even if they were relevant, they were meaningless.

Aikawa hoisted Hime-chan onto her back and stood up.

“Do you want me to take her? You must be tired, Jun.”

“Nah.” Aikawa shook her head. “It’s my job.”

And Aikawa set off down the hall with Hime-chan on her back. Walking along beside her, I asked by way of confirmation, “But we can relax for the moment, right? We’ve come to a stopping point? The Academy doesn’t have a director anymore, or a tactics expert□so all that’s left now is for us to leave, right?”

“……”

“Why’s your answer four ellipses in a row?”

Was she doing an impression of Teruko now?

Even I can do that one.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Aikawa said, not meeting my eyes. “Ichihime did a good job of manipulating info vis-à-vis the other students here, and she did a good job of hiding, but it seems she didn’t do much of anything when it comes to the ‘outside world.’ Apparently there are people who know that something abnormal is going on inside the school.”

“People like who?”

“The various alumnae of Hang ’Em High who now work at Rule. Oh, and the elite of the Origami family. Aaand everyone from all the other branches of Sumiyuri Academy.”

“That’s an ominous list.”

“See, they were all waiting outside the gates.”

“…”

Is that why…it took her so long to get back from changing her clothes?

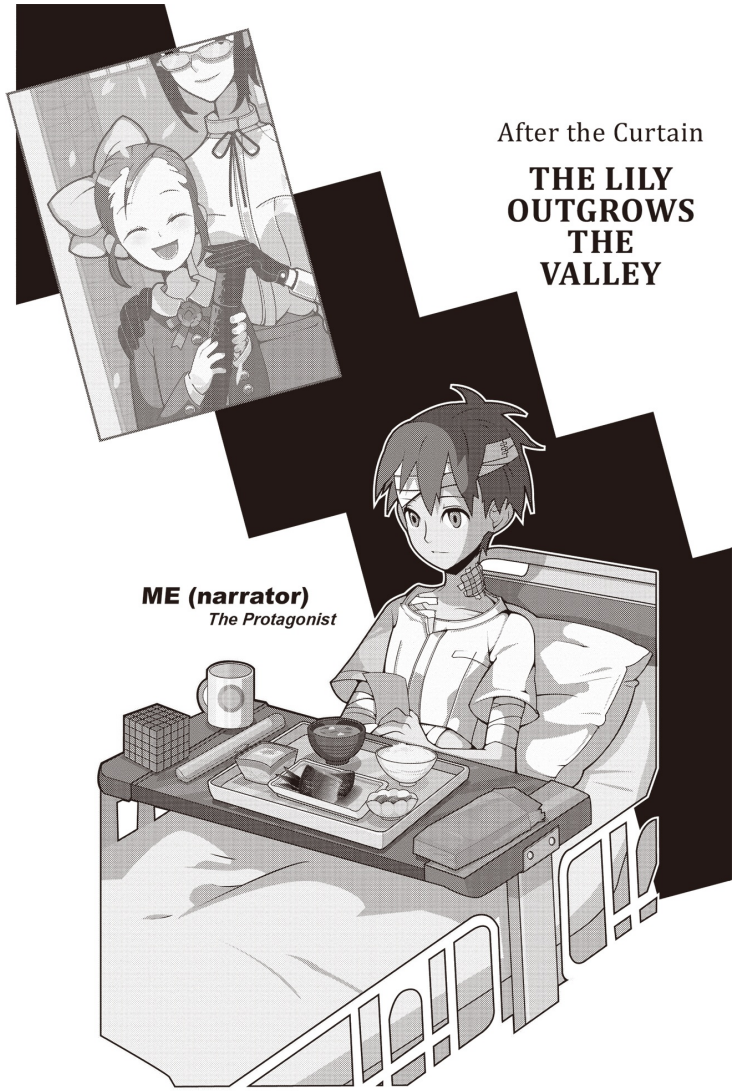
In other words, things have gone from bad to worse…

“Okaaay. This’ll just be the mop-up. Before they all come storming in here, let’s march straight out there like we own the place. Drumroll please.”

Aikawa sounded excited as she strode away down the hallway, so dimly lit that we could see nothing of what lay ahead of us. She walked calmly, ready for anything, for all the world as if she felt no uneasiness at all.

“Those people make me laugh.”

What else could I do? I just followed along behind her, the world’s strongest, like a sigh with a little nonsense mixed in.


After the Curtain
THE LILY OUTGROWS THE VALLEY
ME (narrator)
The Protagonist

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether it's crazier to treat people as objects or objects as people, it's abundantly clear which one is more of a nuisance—so I'll omit everything that happened after that. And, some time later.

I was in a certain hospital in the Kyoto suburbs. Completely healed in a week—that was the prognosis I'd been given. How this outcome came about, I'm actually not going to tell you. The one thing I will say is that if the weakest wants to roll with the strongest, it doesn't come for free; there's a price that must be paid. But if that price is nothing more than a few broken bones, I'd call that a good deal. I'm supposed to go on a trip with Kunagisa at the beginning of next month, so as long as I'm out of the hospital by then, I'll be happy.

Life in the hospital really isn't so boring. I'd only just started reading that book Miiko lent me when Aikawa first showed up, and as long as there's room to stretch out my legs and get some sleep, one place is pretty much as good as another as far as I'm concerned. As long as it's not, well, an abnormal place.

Aikawa came to visit me the day before I was to be discharged from the hospital. This time she didn't knock. It seemed her personal knocking craze had come to an end. She was wearing the same bright-red suit as always, but whether she'd had a new one made or just had a closet full of duplicates, I couldn't tell you.

"Yooo, sorry for the radio silence to keep you waiting! You have but to speak my name and I shall roll over Beethoven! Damn, a private room, huh? Mister moneybags over here."

"I can't bear to sleep in the same room as some stranger, that's all. Just the thought of someone I don't know watching me sleep gives me the willies. It isn't cheap, but what can you do."

"Hmmm. Well then, I've got great news for you," said Aikawa, casually tossing an envelope onto the bed. A fat one. I didn't need

to ask to know what was inside.

“Here’s your piece of the action for helping me out this time around.”

“Thanks anyway, Jun, but I don’t need your money. With Hime-chan the way she is you probably didn’t make much on this job, so this one’s on the house.”

“Aren’t you the stoic one. But this kind of thing has to be done properly. They say a man who has no money might as well have no head, ya know?”

“So? Who cares about a head, it’ll just end up decapitated or strangulated or suspended from the ceiling anyway. I’m pretty sure that expression just means that money’s not all that important.”

“Hanh. Look at you, the humble shepherd.”

Chuckling sardonically, Aikawa sat down in the folding chair set out for well-wishers. I didn’t believe for a second that she was there to wish me well, but I couldn’t tell her not to sit.

“Still, pressing you into service without giving you something in return would go against my moral code. Let’s see. Okay, I’ve got it, I’ll do an impression of Hikari in a compromising position.”

“Please don’t.”

“Ah, no, stop it! Not that! Please, no more! You can’t! Stop, I said!”

“You’re the one who needs to stop!”

“You’re actually pissed!” Even Aikawa was surprised at this, and she put up her hands in surrender. “Wow, that’s a shocker. My bad, I didn’t realize she was so sacred to you…I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I was wrong.”

This apology was delivered in Maki’s voice.

Really got my fucking number, don’t you.

“Why are you really here?”

“No reason. Hadn’t you been hoping I’d come? After all, you’re still just as ignorant as you were at the beginning. So I came to entertain your questions.”

“A-ha… Well, it’s my policy not to get too deep into things that seem like they might be bad news. But I’ll ask anyway.” Still unsure of Aikawa’s true intentions, I began with: “What happened to Hime-chan afterwards?”

“Starting with the hardest question first, are ya, pal? Awright. Here’s what happened to Himecchi.” Without asking, Aikawa took an apple from my basket of get-well goodies and chomped into it. “That stun gun did its work. She lost her memory, and now she’s in a secret hospital.”

“Ah…”

“Her body’s in rough shape, too. It was already starting to wear out thanks to all the training she’d been through in that place, and to sustain that much damage on top of it? Burns all over her body. The fingers directly connected to those lines□particularly nasty. It was mitigated somewhat by her gloves, which had seven layers of insulation, but even if she can hold a pencil, she can’t hold chopsticks. You know about that stuff? Ohm’s law, Joule’s laws, and so forth.”

“So there’ll be some serious lasting effects, huh□” Despite the fact that Aikawa had brought that stun gun for the purpose of taking Hime-chan unharmed. Still, she got off a lot better than if she’d taken on the contractor directly.

“Which is exactly what makes it so tough,” Aikawa said. “Losing her memory means she’s probably forgotten about killing Noa Origami and the rest of the staff, not to mention Shiogi Hagihara and Tamamo Saijo… And it may even mean that she’s forgotten all about Hang ’Em High itself. And as long as her injured fingers haven’t healed, she won’t be able to use Zigzag. You know what that means, right?”

The thought flashed through my mind that that must've been why she took the limiter off the stun gun: to temporarily seal away Zigzag itself, along with the abhorrent memories of it. That may've been nothing more than my own narrativistic sentiment, though.

"It's gonna be hard," Aikawa went on. "It doesn't make the things she's done go away. The people connected to the ones she killed aren't gonna stand for that. The Origami family, Rule, they're falling all over themselves to find the person behind it all."

Just because the culprit forgets the crime doesn't make it go away, and it doesn't mean she can get away without being punished. Whatever the whys and wherefores, she has to take responsibility for her actions. Of course.

"Plus, if I were to 'pretend this never happened' and let Ichihime off the hook, I have a feeling you'd lose respect for me."

"That's not something I ever expected to hear you say. Do you even care about how other people see you, Jun?"

"Qua? If you were just another person, I wouldn't care at all."

She grinned an unpleasant grin. I don't really know why, but I felt like she was making fun of me, so I just shrugged my shoulders and asked a different question.

"How did things all fall out in the end?"

"Hang 'Em High is now effectively shuttered. Just as Ichihime hoped. The students…I wonder what'll become of them. That still seems to be up in the air. And it hasn't come out yet that the three of us were the perpetrators."

I'm an accomplice now?

"Don't worry about it, I've got a few irons in the fire… The Origami family owes me, so no worries on that front. That still leaves the problem of Rule. Nothing you have to worry about, they'll leave you alone. Ichihime, though… I wanna keep them off her scent, but I also wonder if I should."

“So even you have moments of doubt, Jun.”

“Sure. Not like I want ’em, of course. Her memory might return, and her finger might heal up again. I also figure it’s not a good idea to stick my nose in too far. It’d be one thing if she’d actually asked me to conceal the murders.”

She hadn’t—probably because she couldn’t fully trust Aikawa. Which was neither Aikawa’s fault nor Hime-chan’s, it was just one of those things. Like me, I imagine Hime-chan just fundamentally couldn’t trust other people. But she still looked to them for help—and as in this situation, she cooked up a half-baked plan and ended up caught in her own web. Though maybe that’s less fear or trepidation—than vanity and yearning.

“But why did Hime-chan want to kill the Director…no, want to shut down the academy in the first place? What was her initial plan?”

“First, there’s something I wanna apologize for.” Aikawa moved her chair closer to me and leaned in close. “In the beginning I told you something like, ‘Ask Ichihime for the details…she’ll be able to give you a proper explanation.’ That was a lie, sorry.”

“It sure was.”

You only had to talk to her for a minute to know that. Hime-chan was totally incapable of giving a decent explanation of anything. Whatever lies and false fronts she may’ve used to mask her true self, that at least I could say with certainty.

“Her Japanese wasn’t very good, to begin with. No way she was going to give a proper explanation.”

“I figured you’d do a better job if you didn’t know the particulars. I never expected Ichihime herself to actively deceive you… Did she tell you why she’s so bad with words?”

“Let’s see. She said she was raised in America.”

“Yeah? That’s not why, though.” Aikawa tapped my temple with her finger. “Her frontal lobe. An a posteriori injury to her language center.”

“…”

“You know what the frontal lobe does? It’s the part of the brain that controls personality, the ego, and our ability to communicate with others. That part of Ichihime’s brain was damaged. Which is why she has problems with language. She doesn’t even recognize it when it’s happening.”

“Recognition…”

Language recognition.

Or no, was it her word recognition circuit?

“Because of that, conversations with her always go off the rails somewhere. It’s kind of like a Japanese person and a Chinese person conversing in Korean, somehow it never quite comes together.”

Kind of a zigzag feeling, chuckled Aikawa.

“Which is why I’m pretty sure we’ll never find out Ichihime’s true motivation, even if we ask her. Since any kind of mutual understanding is difficult in the first place. What she was thinking when she abandoned herself to those acts will remain an eternal mystery.”

“That’s true of everyone, though, isn’t it?”

No two people can ever fully comprehend each other. It’s simply a question of whether or not you can convince yourself that you can, whether or not you can delude yourself into believing that it’s possible.

Sure is, nodded Aikawa. “So I’ll have to stick to spouting vague approximations based on my best guesses. I suspect she had it all worked out from the start. She inserted me into her machinations by getting me involved, getting me on her side, and pulling the wool over my eyes. She took care of the Director and the rest of the staff first, before sounding the alarm over her own escape… Oh, and FYI, they discovered a ton of dismembered corpses in the staff room. About thirty-seven people’s worth.”

“□”

I already knew she’d killed them, but to hear the actual number said out loud was enough to take my breath away. Thirty-seven people□plus Shiogi and Tamamo and Noa Origami makes forty. Mr. No Longer Human didn’t even kill a third that many last month.

To be perfectly honest, once the number of murder victims exceeds about a dozen, I cease to be able to render a normal value judgment. Quite the reverse, in fact: a certain admiration for Hime-chan even started to well up in me, for pulling that off inside a closed-off space like their school. Which I know is totally inappropriate.

One person in the locked room of the Director’s office, thirty-eight altogether in the locked room of the faculty building□and forty altogether in the locked room of Hang ’Em High.

A closed-off space. Impossible to tell from the outside what’s happening on the inside. Because it was a warzone□because it was a closed-off warzone.

It was probably a piece of cake.

Locked rooms are locked rooms precisely because they’re closed off, but who knew it could be so different□depending on whether they’re closed off to keep things in, or to keep things out.

It’s why this happened, why she did those things.

Can you approve of that behavior?

Well, can you? Mr. Defective Product?

“Her Zigzag was originally intended for crowd-control. It’s not a killing technique, it’s for restraining people. Something like a thread is ultimately more effective than rope for tying someone up. So she restrained them, then chopped them up with a chainsaw. Lessee, what else. She used the walkie-talkie to contact Hagihara on the Director’s dedicated frequency and informed her that ‘Ichihime Yukariki has escaped.’ Her plan was discovered around the time you infiltrated the school, not because she blew it. She revealed it to

them herself."

"She expected it to be you."

"But I sent you in ahead of me. Which Ichihime dealt with as well as she could've…but it did make things a little more precarious for her. She couldn't use Zigzag in front of you, so when they took you two by surprise, she was captured."

Is…that why Hime-chan had been so insistent about staying in that classroom? But I was already taking action even as she tried to veto it. I was definitely an unexpected element for her.

"And I went to have a chat with the Director, just as she guessed I would… That part would've gone the same whether you were there or not. With her flight already revealed, I was even surer to head to Noa's spot than I would've been if it hadn't come out yet. Haha, the little fucker really read my mind."

"So Hime-chan had a certain facility with vocal mimicry and mindreading herself."

"Sure. Though it's not like she was my disciple or anything. So we were together□and this is crucial□we were together when we discovered the Director's body. Then she could play the role of the victim, framed for the crime."

"But that's a dangerous game…"

"That danger worked in Ichihime's favor too, I guess. Same as hiding under the desk. The more of that she did, the less I would suspect her. I did think the way Noa was killed resembled Zigzag… but maybe it was a fake, a copycat? It gave me all kinds of things to waste my time pondering."

"So you knew about 'Zigzag.'"

"Yup. I didn't tell you about it since Ichihime seemed to want to keep it secret. The fact that it was her trump card aside, I didn't think it was the kind of thing she'd want everyone to know. But how did you figure out that she was a weaver? Tamamo's death was one thing, but the person who killed the Director didn't need to be

one.”

“It all came into focus simultaneously for me. Like a chain reaction. I guess once I figure out one thing, it all falls into place. That’s just the kind of person I am: one is all, and all is one. Conversely, that means that until I figure it out, I don’t understand anything at all… Something did trigger it, though. Hime-chan tried to cover her tracks, but it just seemed unnatural that someone would carry around all those threads if they weren’t a weaver. She may have had no choice but to use her lines if she wanted to kill Tamamo without my realizing she’d done so… Still, it was rash.”

Though maybe she just didn’t take me seriously. On that score, I have to admit that Hime-chan wasn’t so crazy after all. If I hadn’t worked backwards from the solution to the locked room, I probably never would’ve figured it out.

“Also, there was the fact that Shiogi was so damn cautious. Her ‘tactics’ were way too elaborate for dealing with any old washout. Like, why not just rely on her material advantage? The answer, of course, being that trying to overwhelm ‘Zigzag’ with superior numbers would be the worst possible strategy.”

“Hmmm.”

“Plus…there’s something fishy about the idea that a washout would try and bamboozle the one and only Jun Aikawa. A nonsense user like me wouldn’t make much of an enemy for the world’s strongest, and neither would plain old ‘Ichihime Yukariki,’ even if she could be her friend. And ‘Zigzag’ was the only likely spot left on the roster for Hime-chan to fill.”

And above all.

The most important clue came from my conviction that none of the characters around me could ever just be cute or weak or pitiful and nothing more.

“Well, there you go. But the part about being a washout wasn’t a lie, ya know. Apart from that one skill…she had nothing else going for her.”

“Of course, the fact that you knew about it means…that Zigzag was a skill she acquired before enrolling at the academy…doesn’t it, Jun.”

“Got me there. It was five years ago. I had a friend who was a failed weaver, nickname of ‘Zigzag.’ It wasn’t originally meant as a compliment, you with me? Anyway, the two of us did a certain job together. On that occasion we rescued the twelve-year-old Ichihime Yukariki…and since then, Ichihime has idolized the two of us. Me, I didn’t pay too much attention to her, but…”

Was that also when she sustained the injury to her frontal lobe? But that wasn’t the question I needed to ask. There was only one thing to ask now.

“Was the person’s name Yuma Shisei, by any chance?”

“Huh?” Aikawa looked up in surprise. “You know about her? It’s not like she’s all that well-known.”

“No…not really. Anyway, she…”

“Yup. She was Ichihime’s master.” Aikawa smiled cynically. “And a former teacher at Hang ’Em High. Thanks to that connection, Ichihime started going to a middle school affiliated with the place, and here we are. Now, back to the topic at hand. Let’s see, how far had I gotten? Oh right. Her decision to be our fellow suspect. Once again she was right on the money: she figured that even with the door locked, I’d find some way to force my way in… Dammit, she was always a sneaky little minx. You know more about what happened next than I do, so I’ll leave it at that.”

“She didn’t want us to think she was the one who killed the Director… But what about the mountain of corpses she’d left in the staff room?”

“She must’ve figured I’d assume that if she wasn’t the one who killed the Director, someone else must’ve killed everyone else too. But that was where she took it too far. Once you and Ichihime were gone, what the hell could I do but come looking for you, so I left the Director’s office as well. But I decided to stop by the staff room

and say a quick hello. I headed down to the floor below…and holy shit. However abnormal Hang 'Em High might be Ichihime Yukariki was the only person there who could possibly do that on her own."

Was that when it all came out? Her crimes laid bare not by suspicion but by trust. But she could never have let the staff live. In which case Hime-chan's strategy was blown from the start.

…Or.

No, that's probably not how it went. Probably Aikawa hadn't realized the truth in any real sense until she overheard me and Hime-chan's conversation in the hallway. Whatever she herself may think, I'm pretty sure that's how it went.

That's the kind of person she is.

"But be it the locked room or anything else, I can't believe it would've been opaque. To anyone but you, Jun."

"I was the only one she needed to fool. Otherwise she wouldn't have had any reason to kill you…or would she? You are an irritating son of a bitch."

"…But if she had never summoned you to the school in the first place, you'd never have found out. Choosing to actively deceive you instead of holding onto a secret that might or might not be revealed… Talk about 'getting caught in your own web.'"

"Thing is, she made a promise, a long time ago. When she became Shisei's disciple. That she would never use Zigzag to kill."

"But that technique…oh. Originally it was meant for restraining people, for self-defense, huh?"

So that's why she had to hide the truth from Aikawa, in particular. It probably wasn't the only reason but went some way towards explaining that bit. A motive for murder is always a complicated tangle of different threads, hard to put into words…but it seemed we could safely say that one of those threads was Hime-chan's master, Yuma Shisei, and another was Jun Aikawa.

“But the academy wouldn’t allow her to honor that promise…which is why she never should’ve gone to a school like that in the first place. She’s dead already, let it go…stupid kid.”

But Yuma Shisei knew what would happen.

“When I think about the Director, though, or Shisei, it’s not like I don’t get it. Actually you know what? Never mind, I don’t get it.”

“But I’m just going to come out and say this, Jun: you’re too soft. Where was your mindreading on this one? In retrospect, whose handiwork could that locked room have been but Hime-chan’s?”

“Not like you figured it out right away.”

“But I’m just incompetent.”

And this was never my riddle to solve in the first place.

“Hanh. Not to sound like Maeda Keijiro Toshimasu, but trusting and being betrayed feels better to me than being suspicious and staying safe.”

There was no visible hint of self-reflection in Aikawa’s indomitable smile. She didn’t even seem to have any regrets, no, nor was she even hurt.

“Jun, you really don’t think this calls for any kind of reconsideration?”

“Not at all. The fact that I care about Ichihime’s got nothing to do with what she’s done. Haha, same reason I’m not even mad that you were going to betray us, Iitan.”

She knew.

“You slippery bastard. Trying to beguile Ichihime like that as soon as your life was on the line. Why not come live with me what the hell? You’d just betrayed her five minutes earlier.”

She knew everything.

“I…didn’t intend to betray her.”

Ultimately, the fact that Aikawa was “soft on her friends” stemmed from an overestimation of the rest of the world on her part. Because she herself was the best of the best, she couldn’t comprehend things like my and Hime-chan’s weakness. And even if she could comprehend it, she couldn’t accept that kind of compromise.

“Whether or not I’m soft, I can’t dismiss her feelings. Anyone would end up like that if they were stuck in a homicidal school like Hang ’Em High. Anyone would want to do what she did. It’s just that Ichihime was the only one with the skills to carry it out, that’s all.”

“Skills…”

“That strange little body of hers is a testament to her poor upbringing. She doesn’t even weigh seventy pounds. You’re friends with Kunagisa, you must get it. Though their circumstances are a little different.”

“…”

“Not that I’m saying you’ve gotta have sympathy for her or anything. But don’t blame her just because you happen to hate people who remind you of yourself.”

“I have no intention of blaming her. This whole thing is none of my business, from start to finish. If you hadn’t gotten me involved, I never would’ve known a thing about any of it.”

“Glad you feel that way.”

Whatever the case, Hime-chan…would probably not have been able to get out of there under her own steam. Zigzag was definitely a useful technique, but fundamentally a defensive one. Except for times when she could set a trap and lie in wait, like she did for Shiogi, it was no different from using an ordinary knife. Without the element of surprise, it was possible to avoid the Zigzag even if you weren’t Aikawa. Which is why□and yes, this was the same as Aikawa’s strategy□she struck at the core first. Though that may have involved a certain amount of resentment as well. Asking for

Aikawa's help after her wholesale slaughter of the faculty…

"But…that doesn't add up. If she simply wanted to escape, the best thing would've been to leave it all to you, Jun. That would've been plenty good enough. I guess her primary goal must've been to kill the Director after all. If the death of the person she thought of as her master had something to do with the change in directorship, it's even possible that she enrolled at the school with the intention of killing her all along."

"They're not unrelated…but I think you're really overthinking it."

If it were just the murder, Hime-chan would've been fine on her own. It was the escape after the murder for which she needed Aikawa's help. She would get Aikawa's cooperation in fleeing the scene of her crime, and then work it so that Aikawa would never suspect her. It was a completely self-contradictory, zigzagging plan□but was that the whole extent of Hime-chan's strategy?

"Who knows, maybe she wanted me to figure out that she was the murderer. Maybe she was feeling remorseful, or penitent, something like that? Moronic as that might be."

Uh huh…that seemed most likely. Achieve all her objectives, and have Aikawa render judgment on her to boot. That was such a compelling narrative that even someone like me had a hard time discarding it. If you're going to get killed no matter what□at least let it be by a greater force than yourself.

A confused desire born of desperation.

We don't get to choose our friends, so she at least wanted to choose the enemy that would destroy her.

"She deceived us in order to be found out…but that's too irresponsible for words, Jun."

"Responsibility, huh? What a strange notion."

"Yeah. I…don't really understand it."

"Nope, me neither. Maybe all she wanted was to have some fun

with me. There at the very end.”

At the very end?

She never intended to survive, never intended to succeed at keeping it hidden… I have a hard time believing that, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true. Since I never could comprehend Hime-chan’s feelings, even at the end. Same way I still can’t comprehend “her” feelings, even now.

Even thinking about it is pointless.

The history of the losers will never be told.

Soldiers die in battle, and tacticians die in confusion.

And weavers get caught in their own webs.

Ultimately.

Hime-chan wasn’t a stand-in for “her.” That alone seems clear to me. It would’ve taken more than that to break Tomo Kunagisa.

“Well, with this many hypotheses, one of ’em has to be right,” Aikawa said. For a time my hospital room fell silent. She finished the apple, core and all, and reached out her hand towards the basket again. “Hm this the kind of thing you eat?”

She plucked a 5x5x5 Rubik’s Cube, exactly the same size as an apple, from the basket.

“No, that’s something Kunagisa left when she came to visit me. It was supposed to help pass the time, but I can’t solve those no matter how hard I try, so I just left it in there.”

“She came to see you? I thought she couldn’t manage stairs on her own, except at home?”

“She said an old friend named ‘Hiichan’ or something brought her.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re in such a bad mood, Iitan…” Aikawa solved the cube while she was saying this, never once looking down

at her hands, then returned it to the basket of fruit. “Anyway.”

From her seemingly apathetic attitude, I knew we were finally getting to the real reason for her visit, and I readied myself.

“This time around I plumbed the depths of your peculiar nature, and I’ve got you all figured out.”

“My nature, is it? Well, Shiogi called me a ‘non-actor’ or something.”

“Yeah…that sounds about right. Fact is, I’m regretting it just a little bit. Getting you mixed up in this, I mean. I think it might’ve been a mistake. Don’t you? If you hadn’t been there, at least Shiogi Hagihara and Tamamo Saijo would still be alive. Ichihime wanted to kill as few of the ‘students’ as possible, since they were in the same boat as her. The ‘faculty’ were there because they wanted to be—but the ‘students’ had no choice.”

Shiogi had said something about how there was “no place better suited to me than here,” but—I think I can safely say. That there was. Shiogi and Tamamo just didn’t know it. They just couldn’t find other objectives or motivations. And I just wasn’t able to provide them, that’s all.

“But blaming me for their deaths is over the line. It’s got nothing to do with me, does it?”

“You’re constantly surrounded by calamity, and people are constantly dying around you. You—how can I put this, you make people feel like they can’t settle down. You make them anxious. So the people around you are forced out of their comfort zones—and as a result they let their guard down. That’s exactly why I used you for this assignment—but that aspect of your nature doesn’t discriminate between friend and foe. Ichihime got caught up in it too. She killed Tamamo for the sake of your safety, and she didn’t kill Shiogi because she’d ‘found out the truth,’ she killed her to save you; you’d let yourself be captured so Hime-chan could escape, and Shiogi had you trapped like a rat—doesn’t that sound more plausible? Ichihime only wanted to hide her crime from me, her friend. And, locked room or no locked room, once the corpses were discovered she was

going to come under suspicion no matter what."

"I see. I guess that's another way of looking at it."

"Someone who shakes people up just by being there, who makes others lose sight of themselves just by being there… Individuals like you aren't all that rare. When they're around you can't settle down, you get irritated, things don't go like they usually do… Psychology has a way of explaining such people: in terms of 'defects.' The people observing you have similar deficiencies, so they start to feel like theirs are being pointed out to them, and it shakes them up. Some people decide that that feeling is love, and some decide it's hostility. The former want to commiserate with you, while the latter hate you for being similar to them. And you're the top of the line in that department. You have no personality, so you're not similar to anyone□but you lack so much that you're similar to everyone. Which acts on their non-conscious minds; your conscious non-action undermines them. And on top of that, you exploit it cleverly. You ward things off without putting up any kind of ward, you ingratiate yourself without any ingrained defenses. You let others pass, deflect, avoid, evade. You use nonsense to run away, flee, escape. Even though they can't settle down when you're around□no one can touch you. It's pretty much like being around a ghost or a devil. That's why the machinery goes crazy around you, and people's switches end up getting flipped. Same was true back in April, and back in May."

"I said this to Shiogi as well, but…you're overestimating me." I shook my head slowly. "I'm nothing special. I just wander around without ever knowing what's going on."

"If there's any silver lining…" Aikawa continued undaunted, totally ignoring my attempt to vindicate myself, "it's that you have no goals. To be perfectly honest, you freak me out a little. If you develop any kind of intentionality… If you start heading somewhere, who the hell knows what you'll be capable of? When that happens, the only ones who'll be able to avoid your influence are people like Zerozaki, who're absolutely identical to you. Everyone who's even the slightest bit different…will go off the rails, every last one of them. It'll be so much worse than it is now, you'll drag the people around you into your orbit and the accidents'll

spiral out of control.”

Sure□like before.

When I destroyed Tomo Kunagisa.

“Sounds kind of like a horror novel.”

Aikawa’s expression didn’t change at my joke□

She whipped her finger up…

“So I think it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to kill you right now.”

And snapped it back down as she said that.

“□”

Nothing□happened.

Nothing…happened.

“That’s a harsh joke.”

“Joke? Did you say joke?” Aikawa put on a show of exaggerated surprise. “Right, right. Keep telling yourself that.”

“…”

“Haha. If you were gone, who’d set up my punchlines for me?” Then, cynically, “’Kay, pal, I’m outta here.” Standing up, she folded the chair and put it back where she’d found it. And just for good measure, she took another apple from the basket. “Until the threads of fate entwine once more. May your future hold most excellent misfortune, and a pathetic excuse for good fortune.”

She started walking out of the room.

My final question was directed at her back.

“Why did Hime-chan□”

“Huh? Why did Hime-chan what?”

“Why do you think Hime-chan called me that?”

“Come on, it’s not hard. Or do you,” Aikawa turned the question back on me, “not understand why she hid the truth about Zigzag from you? Mental problems aside, it wouldn’t’ve been inconvenient for her if you knew she was a weaver, and yet she played the regular old washout right up till the last second. Do you not understand why she really did that?”

“No, I don’t.” Even though it was my own question, I hung my head and averted my eyes from Aikawa’s. “Wasn’t it just that she wanted me to underestimate her? By playing the stupid high schooler, she could keep me off my guard.”

“Not even close, you moronnn. Hanh, basically, she conflated the two of you. Mister Somebody, who resembles nobody and so can resemble anybody. She projected you,” Aikawa sneered. “Same way you projected her onto Tomo Kunagisa. Talk about ships in the goddamn night.”

Just as I saw Tomo Kunagisa in Hime-chan.

Hime-chan saw something in me?

“Think I’ll ever see her again?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you two together again soon, whether you like it or not.”

And with that, the contractor disappeared from my sight. As always, throwing my mind into disarray as she did so. While she may not have done what she usually did, further solving something I’d already solved, she did leave me with a whole new host of concerns.

Dammit…the Princess of Intimation, the Empress of Insinuation, Her Majesty the Queen of Suggestion. Thanks a lot, leaving me with a lapful of ambiguous and possibly spurious foreshadowing. Tamamo was one thing, but I’d wanted to point out that maybe the reason Shiogi got killed was because Aikawa had gone for a costume change.

“So does the whole ‘no personality’ thing mean people get to say whatever they want? Everyone expects too much of me… Gimme a break already.”

Even though I’m nothing more than an introverted nineteen year old with no imagination who’s maybe a little on the voluble side.

While I was pondering this, the nurse came in with a tray of food, almost like she’d tagged in when Aikawa left. Or more likely Aikawa had sensed the approach of the nurse and departed accordingly. She’s like a ninja.

“That cool babe with the fashion sense of a stand user who was just leaving your room? Never seen her before. She come to visit you in the hospital, Ii-Ii?” the nurse asked with keen interest, looking over her shoulder towards the door. “She your big sister, Ii-Ii? Your cousin?”

She seemed convinced we were related.

“Oh…she’s my girlfriend.”

“Whaa?”

She didn’t even try to hide her doubt.

“See, she’s madly in love with me. It’s a real problem, barging in on me even here. I was hoping for some time alone while I was in the hospital, at least.”

“Right, right. G-o-o-o-tcha.”

The nurse clearly didn’t believe a word I said.

“It may not have seemed like it, but when it’s just the two of us she’s really something. She’ll do literally anything I say.”

“Sure, sure, of c-o-o-o-urse. You lucky dog, you. Ii-Ii, what a stuuuud.”

She lined up plastic dishes on the table as she said this.

“Lovey dovey～♪ kissy kissy～♪”

What the hell is this hospital doing, hiring a nurse with so much personality? I was getting kind of annoyed (on top of which I was feeling emptied out), so I decided to change the subject.

“Excuse me, nurse, but do you read detective novels?”

“I’m a nurse practitioner,” she corrected me. Sounds to me like the difference between a tactics expert and a tactical expert, but I guess she was a particular person. “Sure, I read them, por qua?”

“Because it’s Quiz Time.” I picked up the envelope Aikawa had left behind, and as I examined its contents, I continued, “Say there’s a room somewhere. The door has a biometric hand scanner, so from the outside it can only be locked or unlocked by the room’s owner. One day, you and your two friends, the three of you, visit that room. The door is locked and it won’t open, so you force it open, and inside you discover the dismembered corpse of the room’s owner.”

“Ahh, a locked-room murder. This really brings me back.” The nurse smiled. “A handprint, huh… Sounds like Lupin.”

“So, how did the culprit pull off this impossible task?”

“Let me think. A-ha, got it. That’s an easy one.” After she had finished laying out my meal, the nurse turned to face me. “The murderer dismembered the body inside the room, then took one of the hands and used it to lock the room from the outside. Dismembering the whole body was camouflage, because in fact the killer only needed to sever one hand. In other words, the ‘key to the room’ was just the palm, and directly after death the scanner would still respond to it like it would to a living thing. Teheh, talk about a helping hand.”

“…”

“You’d be all shaken up if there was a dismembered corpse right there in front of you, so you wouldn’t realize at first glance that one little piece was missing. Yeah. So the culprit must be one of the

three who discovered the body. It'd have to be the last person who entered the room, right? He or she could take the severed hand out of whatever it was hidden in, a pouch or something, and put it in a corner of the room while the other two were still in shock at the sight of the body. Wow, that's a mighty gaudy trick."

"…"

As I listened to the nurse's answer, my gaze remained fixed on the contents of the envelope. Bundles and bundles of money and a single photo. It was the photo that Hime-chan must've recovered from my clothes at the same time she took the campus map.

The photo of Hime-chan smiling that honest, genuine smile.

"I'll get you two together again soon"

Now I see, Ms. Contractor.

Really got my fucking number don't you.

You knew exactly the right thing to do.

I don't know what Hime-chan was feeling when she took it from me. I don't know, but I have an inkling. You might call it a memento. A memory, of when Aikawa and Hime-chan first met. A memory called the past, so unlike the future and which, unlike the future, will never be ambiguous.

"Hmm? Come on now, I answer your dumb little quiz for you, and you just sit there gazing at some photo like you want to eat it instead of this meal I brought you? Who's it of, Ii-Ii? Your girlfriend?"

"Does this look like my girlfriend?" How the hell does this nurse see me? "It's not. She's…just a friend."

"You were looking at it pretty affectionately for that. The way someone looks at a daughter, or some sort of disciple."

"Yeah? Well, maybe so."

Snatching this photo from me was the one pure trick Hime-chan played on me, unrelated to either crime or murder. An act devoid of malice. Hime-chan wanted it for herself, so she took it from me. In which case, she'd have to come to me to get it back again. I didn't know where she was now or what she was doing—nor did I know what Aikawa planned to do with her… But with those odds, giving up and admitting I'd been fooled didn't seem so bad.

Hime-chan could never take her place—but, well, there were a lot of things I wanted to teach her anyway.

Yeah, like how to use nonsense, for instance.

What Hime-chan needed was a negative example—like me.

"Hmm. Okay. Anyway, I don't care about any of that. What about my answer to the quiz? I got it right, didn't I? C'mon, Ii-Ii, tell me already."

The nurse peered intently down at me. I callously waved her away before responding. Though you don't need me to tell you whether or not she was correct, of course; it goes without saying. However wide the world may be—

There's only one person in it so soft that she couldn't solve such a simple quiz.

The world's strongest softie.

"You're totally wrong. What a horrible person, suspecting your friends like that."

"And you're totally full of shit."

"Maybe."

Afterword

Other people's will can at times be incomprehensible, and sometimes intrusive or even quite patronizing, but is it just my imagination or does any conviction clear enough to merit the label "will" exert a clear pressure on people who come into contact with it? Well, most of the time it probably is just my imagination, but if we try replacing "will" with "pressure," it works surprisingly well in a lot of instances. And, conversely, if you examine any of your own perfectly innocent actions, you'll find that even those exert an unintentional influence on the people around you, which is honestly kind of shocking. Thinking of yourself as the center of the universe is the height of folly, but by the same token, doing whatever you please as though your actions have no effect whatsoever on the rest of the world might well be the depths of folly. If we accept that our world results from the collisions of various pressures with one another, then it must be said to exist in an extremely tenuous balance, like a balloon that'll pop if you poke it with a needle or maybe it's like walking on spider webs and for that very reason, a single individual's will can bring that equilibrium crashing down. This is very much not a meaningless exaggeration, of course, but that being said, you only very rarely have an opportunity to observe the kind of larger-than-life person who remains unaffected by those pressures, so I ought to think twice about acting like I know what I'm talking about.

This volume is chapter three of the Zaregoto series. As you can see, it has neither theme nor thesis, nor is there anything resembling a will to be found within its pages. The charlatan who calls himself the Nonsense User simply tells it all according to what suits him, leaving a trail of contradictions and false logic in his wake. It's a tale of non-action, so to speak, free from all worldly attachments. Affirmation becomes negation, escape becomes surrender, respect becomes contempt. A nonsense user could never teach anyone anything in the first place, so I was tempted to make the subtitle

“The Nonsense User’s Dishtowel,” but I stopped myself at the last minute. This volume marks a turning point in the Zaregoto series□would tie things up nicely if it were true, but unfortunately it’s not. The words just keep on coming same as ever, marching straight down the road of silliness. So in that spirit, this has been SUSPENSION: Kubitsuri High School - The Nonsense User’s Disciple.

With this book, the NISIOISIN paperback library has finally reached three volumes, and I somehow feel like I’ve reached the end of stage one. In getting to this point I’ve received kind assistance from all quarters, not least of all from the illustrator, take, and the fine people at Kodansha’s paperback division, and these days I’m living only to repay those debts. And of course I’m also grateful for the opportunity to repay my readers by continuing to write these novels, so thank you all very much. Until next time.

NISIOISIN

Suspension 1

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